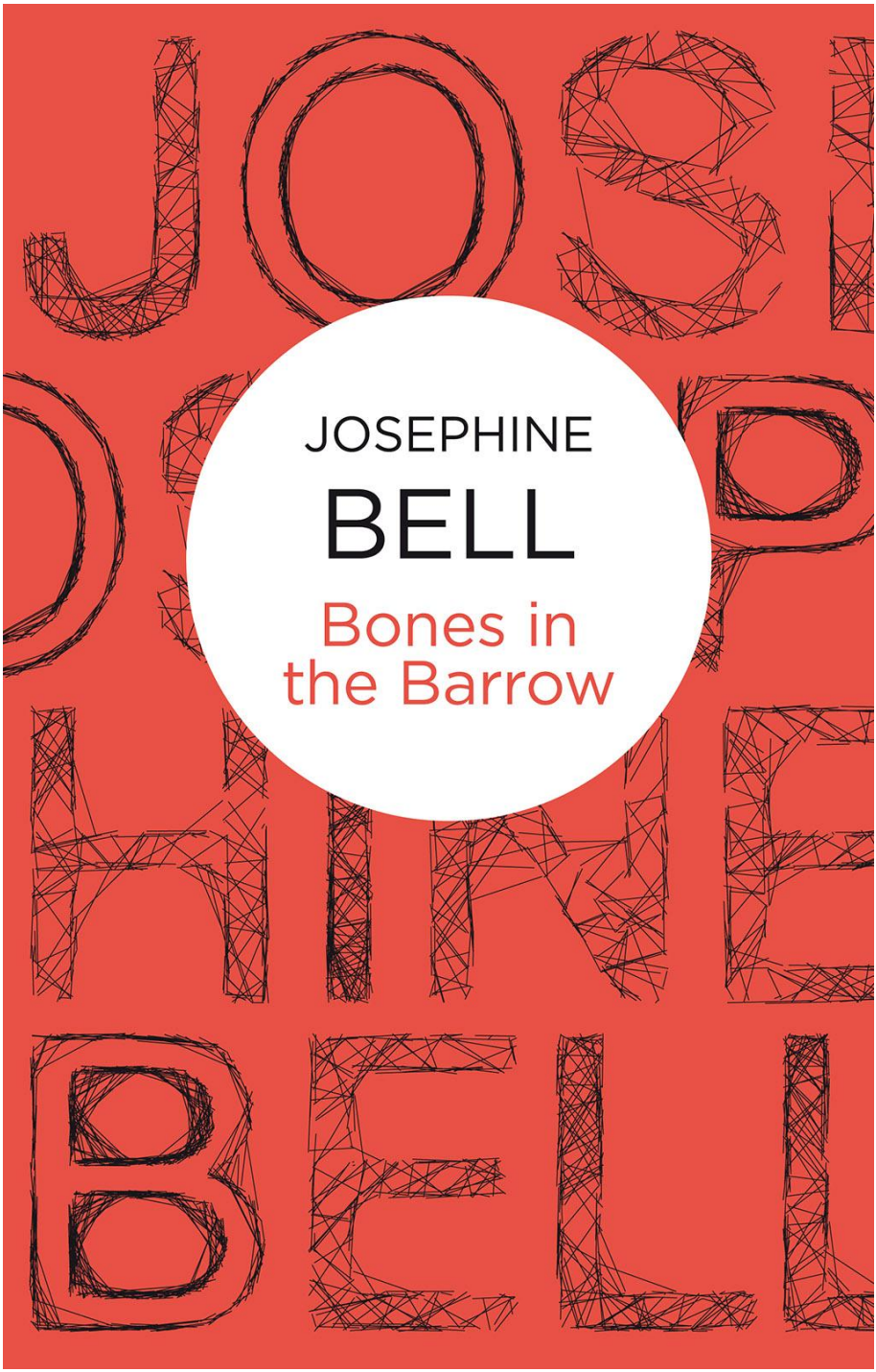
JOSEPHINE
BELL
Bones in
the Barrow

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Josephine Bell

Bones in the Barrow

Josephine Bell

Josephine Bell was born Doris Bell Collier in Manchester, England. Between 1910 and 1916 she studied at Godolphin School, then trained at Newnham College, Cambridge until 1919. At the University College Hospital in London she was granted M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. in 1922, and a M.B.B. S. in 1924.

Bell was a prolific author, writing forty-three novels and numerous uncollected short stories during a forty-five year period.

Many of her short stories appeared in the *London Evening Standard*. Using her pen name she wrote numerous detective novels beginning in 1936, and she was well-known for her medical mysteries. Her early books featured the fictional character Dr. David Wintringham who worked at Research Hospital in London as a junior assistant physician. She helped found the Crime Writers' Association in 1953 and served as chair during 1959–60.

1 A Window in the Fog

The train ground to a stop for the tenth time since it had left Surbiton. Some of the passengers looked up from their newspapers to sigh, to exchange exasperated glances, or to turn up their wrist watches to confirm their fears; many of them continued to read, with the false patience of despair. In time, they supposed, their train would deliver them at Waterloo: they could do nothing to further that end, and they were so late already that it no longer mattered how much later they became.

Outside the windows of the train the fog deepened and grew yellower with every hundred yards of the creeping, interrupted journey. In suburbia it had been no more than a white mist, making car drivers put on their lights and go slowly. Here, another train, clanking past on the next pair of rails, was only a dark wraith, with pinpoint lights showing as each carriage moved slowly on. Fog signals spluttered and cracked. London, beyond, wound and buried in the fog, was silent.

Terry Byrnes stood with his nose to the window of his carriage, staring gloomily into the yellow blanket, and trying to believe that the shapes he saw moving in its depths were real, and not reflections from the carriage behind him. He cursed himself for not starting from home a full hour before the usual time, instead of only twenty minutes early. His mother had warned him the night before that it would be foggy. “He,” the wireless announcer in the Home Service News, had said so in the weather forecast. Terry’s mother relied on “him” implicitly, and was usually justified in doing so. But even his own independent judgment had reached the same conclusion. Nevertheless, he had arrived at the station only twenty minutes before his train was due, to find the usual timetable in chaos, with trains, unspecified, arriving at about half-hourly intervals. So he had eventually found himself in an old-fashioned carriage, narrow, confined, with five seats a side, each occupied by six persons, and a row of four standing. He squeezed in, and being ashamed of his insistence in doing so, and embarrassed by so many hostile eyes, had turned his back on his fellow sufferers, to stare

at the impersonal, all-enveloping fog.

Again the train moved forward a few yards; a fog signal, exploding near at hand, made everyone jump and stare about with anxious eyes; and the first coach, brutally halted as it was gathering speed, checked and bumped back into the next behind. The series of bumps passed away into the distance, while the usual throb and hum of an electric train at rest took the place of all other noise.

It was at this point that Terry became aware of the gap in the fog. First he saw dim shapes, which he decided were pictures of the train that carried him; then he saw the parapet at the edge of the railway line, and beyond that the windows of houses, with roofs above.

He thought with impatience, "Not even Vauxhall," remembering the row of dingy dwellings alongside the railway that heralded the approach of that forbidding junction. While his disgust and impatience churned in his mind, the houses, or rather half-houses, came more clearly out of the mist. He was looking at upper floors and roofs, all dark, all dirty, some windows with lights behind, curtained in tattered lace or cotton, some bare; many dilapidated, unlighted, with broken panes, gaping or stuffed with cardboard.

The train still waited: there was nothing else to look at. Staring sullenly, half dreaming, totally uninterested, Terry now saw move before his eyes, like a film trailer, the swift, inevitable progress of a crime of violence.

At one moment, framed in his hole in the fog, all the dirty windows of the four or five houses were empty. At the next, he saw in one of them the distorted face and frantic figure of a woman. She was in a state of extreme terror; that was clear from her fixed staring eyes and desperate snatching fingers. She was trying to throw up the window. But the catch would not pull back, or the sashes were stuck, or both. She clawed and snatched, her mouth working convulsively. Once she glanced over her shoulder, then went to work again. This in absolute silence, as far as Terry was concerned, the window being shut, and the fog all round, still and deep. Moreover, the carriage window was also closed against its pungent waves, so Terry was doubly isolated. It was like a film with the sound track extinguished.

For a few seconds the woman fought with the window. Then Terry saw a dark shape behind her in the unlighted room. She turned her head, her mouth opening in a scream as she did so. A hand struck, and she toppled forward, sinking slowly down the length of the pane, while Terry thought, dully: “She never broke it! What a bit of luck!”

He could still see her dark hair spread along the window ledge at the foot of the glass. The hand had gone, and the weapon it must have carried, and the dark shape that controlled it. He waited for the woman to stand up again, but nothing happened. The dark hair along the window ledge did not move.

In another second the train came to life. It jerked once and slid forward. The fog closed about it, thicker than ever.

For some minutes Terry Byrnes continued to stare out the window. His mouth had gone dry, and he felt so dizzy that he put a hand on each side of the window to support himself. Then, turning abruptly, he leaned his back against the carriage door. What he had seen, or thought he had seen, could not be true. It belonged to a preposterous world of make-believe, to an unreality, exciting on paper, but unthinkable in cold bare fact. He felt he wanted to look at his fellow travellers: all these patient, peaceful citizens, quietly waiting to be conveyed through a difficult, perhaps dangerous, obstacle, to their quiet civilized jobs. It reassured him when an elderly businessman leaned forward to test the door against which he leaned, murmuring, “Can’t be too careful,” before he sat back and turned to the next page of his newspaper.

Though it took another twenty minutes of stopping and starting, the train did at last reach Waterloo, and Terry got out with the rest. By now his first numb refusal to recognize the truth of what he had seen had been replaced by a feverish excitement. It was a case of brutal assault: probably murder, he decided, thinking of the still dark mass of hair on the window ledge, behind the smeared glass pane. By pure chance he had seen it happen. No one else, except the woman and the man—it must surely have been a man—knew anything about it. He dismissed the possibility that other people were in the house, and must know something had happened. He carried a fearful

secret.

When he reached this conclusion, just after he had automatically returned his season ticket to his pocket, on passing the barrier, Terry stood still in the wide expanse of Waterloo Station. Irrelevant dance music blared against the blasts of the engines, and the noise of travellers; the crowds wove intricate patterns round the bookstalls and buffets and in front of the train indicators.

To get away from the noise and organized confusion, he walked deliberately out of the station, and crossing the road, quite careless of vehicles crawling past him in the fog, found himself presently beside the parapet of Waterloo Bridge. Here he stopped, looking down at the mist swirling above the unseen river reach.

He was dreadfully alone with his knowledge. In the train his natural reluctance to announce anything so fantastic had seemed to be justified by the futility of doing so. His own complete helplessness in the circumstances applied also to his companions. But now, remembering the terror in the woman's staring eyes, her frantic struggle to throw up the closed window, presumably to call for help, and her mouth, distorted in that unheard final scream, as the blow fell, he felt his knowledge swell and grow within him, an unbearable distension.

But it was not easy to find relief. Whom should he tell, and when, and how? He was due at the office. He ought to have walked straight down the Underground, to take the train to Bank. From the bridge where he stood he could walk to Aldwych and find a bus, if they were running. Or he could go back to Waterloo. In any case he was going to be very late, and though the fog was a good all-covering excuse, he would have to work hard and steadily to make up for lost time.

Terry was a conscientious boy. He had won his place at the Grammar School and meant to make the most of his chances. He was not going to blot his copy-book with the boss for the sake of an unknown woman who was in no way his responsibility. If he did make up his mind to do anything, it must come at the end of his day's work. Until then, he determined to put the whole thing out of his mind. Acting now with excess of caution, he turned abruptly and retraced his steps to Waterloo.

Half an hour later he was sorely tempted to spill out the

whole story. He found he was the last but one of the staff to arrive at the big insurance office where he was starting his career. The last was a girl clerk who was unlikely to appear at all. Fog usually brought a message from her the following day to say that she was confined to the house with asthma. It was recognized that she never suffered from this disease at any other time, but fog was a certain cause of an attack. Terry, discounting her, felt he had moved down to the bottom of the form.

Later, he spent five uncomfortable minutes with the head clerk of his department.

"The others managed to do better than you, Byrnes," this individual stated coldly. "And many of them have further to come."

"The train kept stopping, sir," Terry said truthfully.

"Don't be childish. Of course it did. And it was late starting, no doubt. But you knew there was fog. You could have left home earlier."

"I left half an hour early," Terry said, this time improving a little on the truth.

"What time did your train get to Waterloo? It was your usual train, getting in late, I suppose?"

Terry had no idea which train it had been. Together with all the other businessmen waiting on the platform, he had got into the first one that came into Toxley Green. So he nodded to the second question, ignoring the first.

"What time did it get to Waterloo?"

Again Terry had not the faintest idea. He only knew what time it was when he finally reached Bank Station, and realized that he was over an hour and a half late at the office. He made a rapid calculation and said, "Ten o' clock, sir."

The head clerk seemed to be satisfied, at last, or bored, or conscious of the pointlessness of his questions. The boy was only seventeen, after all, in his first year there; he was a good enough boy as a rule. He said: "Very well, Byrnes. Another time in case of fog, allow yourself an extra hour. Never take advantage of weather conditions to show slackness. You only let down the others."

"Yes, sir. Very sorry, sir."

Terry went back to his desk, much less contrite than before the interview, but feeling like a near-criminal. If he told his

amazing story here, he felt, he would be in danger of being arrested on the spot. It was bad enough to let the others down, whatever that meant, and he suspected that it meant very little. It would let down the whole principle of Life Insurance, as conducted so discreetly and so expensively in that labyrinth of offices, to be mixed up, however distantly and impersonally, with a murder.

But his conscience would not let him rest. He went out to lunch with his friends at the office, but could not share, as usual, in the general discussion of Football League prospects, players, and transfers. He could see only staring eyes and plucking fingers. His friends thought he had taken his lateness and its results to heart, and tried to make him laugh it off. But he stayed serious and preoccupied, only able to forget his problem by sinking himself in his afternoon's work.

The head clerk found him still at his desk when the others had gone.

"I wanted to make up, sir," Terry explained. It was only partly true. He wanted, above all, to delay what he knew he must do next.

"Have you finished?"

The head clerk, inwardly pleased with his junior, kept his stern looks unaltered.

"Nearly, sir."

"You can stay another quarter of an hour. I don't want you here after that. The place will be shut. I shall have left myself. Fifteen minutes only, remember."

"Thank you, sir."

He had to leave when the time was up. While he was fetching his raincoat from the cloakroom, he made a bargain with himself. If the fog was as bad as ever, he would grope his way to the Underground and go straight home. If it had cleared—

He came out into the street. Above the houses a black pall hung thickly. Church spires disappeared into its depths, and the roofs of the taller houses. But below in the street there was only a light mist. The buses drove past at their usual pace. The shops and advertisements were bright on the other side of the road.

Terry crossed to the stop and climbed on to a Whitehall bus.

Waiting at Scotland Yard, his information, which had swelled to such enormous proportions, suddenly deflated. He felt the same sense of unreality that he had experienced directly after the incident, when he had turned to look round the carriageful of ordinary people amongst whom he stood. What did it really amount to, after all? Someone had socked a woman on the head. A quarrel, probably. Had she really been hurt? Had the blow really touched her, or had she ducked? Women were often hysterical—so he had read, and been told by his friends. It was none of his business, anyhow. He was a fool to be there. Telling on people. The crime of crimes, all his life. Telling a copper, too. The final betrayal. But deep in his right-feeling soul, Terry, the essential law-abider, knew that he had to go through with it. Murder was murder. Against all his specious arguments, he knew in his heart that he had seen a kill.

By the time he was called into a quiet office room to tell his story to Chief-Inspector Johnson, his inner conviction had re-established itself completely. The inspector's bland lack of excitement served to increase it.

"You say you saw this attack take place in a house overlooking the railway line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Through a gap in the fog?"

Terry nodded.

"Your train was near enough for you to see the expression on the woman's face?"

"Oh, yes."

"But surely the Toxley Green trains never run on the line next to the parapet. I travel that way myself. You must have been two or even three lines off. The fog was thick enough to hold up your train to the extent you describe, yet the temporary gap in the fog allowed you to see across a distance of not less than fifty yards, and to see clearly?"

"I don't know about all that. I'm telling you what I saw."

Chief-Inspector Johnson looked across the table at the thin-necked boy on the other side. The youngster believed in his story, hallucination or otherwise. It was not a hoax, unless the kid had unlimited powers of deception. He was not trying to argue: he was describing something he had seen and accepted at its face value, terrible as that might be. The inspector softened

in his manner.

"I'm not trying to catch you out," he said, "but I'll be frank with you. We have not been called in over anything remotely resembling this crime of yours. It's approximately nine hours since it happened, according to you. The body should have been found by now. Or the injured person attended to. I think you said you heard the woman scream for help."

"Saw," corrected Terry patiently. "I didn't hear anything. The window was shut, and then the fog smothers noise, doesn't it? I saw her mouth open, and her neck go stiff, like when anyone yells."

"I see. You can't describe the assailant?"

"No. I only saw a hand with something in it."

"Something?"

"I was looking at *her*," said Terry desperately. "I only saw *him* out of the corner of my eye, sort of. If you'd seen her expression you'd know what I mean. I couldn't 've looked anywhere else."

He felt the sweat break out on his forehead as he remembered the horror of that moment. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. Johnson called for a subordinate and gave instructions. Then he turned back to Terry.

"I am checking up with the hospitals," he said, "and with our latest information. Something may have come in about it by now. Did you find it in the papers this afternoon?"

"I didn't try," Terry answered.

It had simply not occurred to him to look. His Sensation was a real one; it had nothing to do with the gossip drama he was accustomed to reading with such pleasure on his way home from work.

Again the inspector was surprised, impressed, and in a curious way, touched, by Terry's answer. The boy must have something, he decided. He hoped it was not a mental disease.

"Well, now," he said, "it ought to be fairly simple to fix the position of the place and check it afterwards with the railway people. What train did you get from Toxley Green?"

"Eight-thirty. The trains were all late, so I don't know—"

"Eight-thirty, Toxley Green," said Johnson, making a note of it. "Do you mean the time was eight-thirty, or is that the normal time of the train you go by?"

"The normal time of the train. But you see, on account of the

fog it was after nine that—"

"What time did you make Waterloo?"

"Ten," said Terry, and immediately saw himself plunged into a pit of complicated lies. Ten was the time he had noted when he finally went down into the Underground, but it was not the time he had arrived at the station. There had been his frantic meditation on Waterloo Bridge in between. He simply did not know the correct time of his train's arrival. And he could not take back what he had said. For this copper would want to check it and would do so with the boss, and he had told the boss ten at Waterloo, which fitted in with his undoubted arrival at the office at ten-twenty. So the lie must rest. Anyway, he didn't know which train it had been. He had got into the first one that came, sometime between nine and half-past. No one was bothering with the exact time; there was no point. They were late, and they couldn't do a darned thing about it.

"Did you pass Vauxhall Junction before or after this incident?" the inspector was asking; he seemed to be repeating the question.

"After. No. I don't know," Terry answered hurriedly. He remembered thinking that the houses were the ones before Vauxhall, but he could not recollect passing the station.

"What d'you mean?"

"I thought they were those near the line, after Nine Elms, but I couldn't really see. I only saw two or three of them, and not clearly then. After I saw what I've told you, I didn't look at anything else."

"And after you moved on?"

"I don't know." Terry turned his eyes from the inspector.

"Why don't you know?"

"I wasn't looking out the window. Not afterwards."

Johnson rested his chin on his hand. The lad had been upset, properly upset, and did not want to acknowledge it.

"I suppose you said nothing at the time to the other people you were with?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"They'd have thought I was scatty."

There was a silence. Then the inspector said briskly, "Well," and rose to his feet, which made Terry get up too. "If we make

anything out of this we'll get in touch with you. Just as well not to spread it about, you know. Rumours have to start somewhere, and the press is always hungry, and expects us to feed it. Besides, people are apt to jump to funny conclusions. So be careful."

"You don't think I'm making it up, do you?" Terry asked. "Or seeing things?"

"I don't," said the inspector. "But other people might. Don't worry, son. You saw something real, all right. But you may be exaggerating the meaning of what you saw."

"It was murder," said Terry.

"O.K. We'll contact you in due course."

Terry was shown out of the Yard. At Westminster Station he bought three evening papers. A girl had been found strangled on a heath, four people had been killed on the roads, two in plane crashes. One child, unattended, had fallen into an ornamental lake and been drowned, and another, similarly neglected, off the parapet of a third-floor balcony, and been crushed. But no one had found, or reported finding, the body of a woman with her head sunk on a grimy windowsill, in a room near Vauxhall Junction, overlooking the suburban line from Toxley Green to Waterloo.

Nor did the police find any trace of a crime committed on that foggy day in November.

The Insurance Company agreed with the stated time of Terry Byrnes's arrival at the office. The Railway Authority identified the train he must have caught and corroborated the fact of its stopping on the Wimbledon side of Vauxhall. The upper windows of the houses Terry had described were clearly visible two sets of rails away. Of the occupied houses in the row, three were accustomed to letting the top room on the railway side. But in two the lodgers had clearly no connection with Terry's victim, and in any case had been there for a considerable time, and the third was occupied by two brothers. No one in the row had ever seen a woman with curly dark hair framing her face, and large dark eyes and a wide mouth and a pale skin and long bony hands, as Terry had described her. No one had heard any sort of disturbance or quarrel. They all remembered the morning

of the fog quite clearly. The railway was noisy enough, what with the fog signals and that. As for a scream, women were always yelling out, weren't they?

The inquiry, meeting this sort of half derisory, half indignant response, was not pursued with enthusiasm. Only Chief-Inspector Johnson, who had been so strangely impressed by Terry's manner, took it at all seriously. He was not allowed to give it much time, however.

"It's rather more important to find murderers who have left us the body to work on," Detective-Superintendent Mitchell told him.

"I'm certain the boy knew what he was talking about."

"If he did we shall hear more of it. The woman must have had friends or relations of some kind. Sooner or later she'll be posted as missing."

"They aren't always. We find plenty that are never claimed."

"You can't have it both ways," said Mitchell, obscurely. "File it for reference. You never know your luck."

Terry waited in a fever of impatience for a week. Then he inquired at the Yard and was told to wait till he heard, and not to bother them. This was put in kindly and formal terms by Chief-Inspector Johnson. On his way out he saw the sad little row of notices about persons missing. He studied it carefully. Most of them had been found in the river: none resembled the image in his mind.

After another fortnight had gone by, with no news, he found the burden of his secret becoming unbearably heavy. He wanted to fall in with Chief-Inspector Johnson's wishes, because he was grateful to the Inspector for not making fun of his story. So he decided not to tell his girl friend. In any case women were too excitable for such news, and she would be angry with him for not telling it to her while it was hot. There was one friend, however, who would be safe with the secret. This was Cyril Collings, who had left the Grammar the same term as himself, and was set on making a career in science, though at present he was no more than a lab boy, washing test tubes, and setting up apparatus, and running messages, at St. Edmund's Hospital. He decided to tell Cyril the whole story and to ask his advice.

2 The Cat's-Meat Man

It was a hard winter. In November there were fogs, thicker, darker, and more persistent than for many years. In January, snow, lasting well into February, and bringing in its wake a harvest of jobs for the builders and plumbers, by way of cracked pipes, broken skylight windows, and blocked gutters.

Among other sufferers were the tenants of certain properties not far from the Southern Region of British Railways, as the lines run out from Waterloo Station. When these people complained too loudly and urgently to be ignored, of dripping ceilings and fallen plaster, the landlord with great reluctance sent along a firm of builders to investigate the trouble. They sorted it out and made it good again. Whereupon other people, living opposite the scene of activity, and following their neighbours' example, set a familiar repair work in train. The same firm undertook it. With the first job barely completed, they moved their ladders across the road, erected them again, and started upon an exactly similar set of steep gulleys, sloping tiles, and narrow chimney pots.

The snow had lain a good four inches thick on the roofs of all this part of London. But whereas the slopes the builders had first dealt with lay facing south, these faced north. In the first case the wintry sun, not altogether devoid of warmth, had hastened the thaw before its time. Consequently, after two whole days of clear sky and bright sun, the snow had melted fast, and being loosened all in a piece, had, on the next day, slid down from the chimneys and, gathering momentum, burst the narrow parapet, and fallen to the street below, carrying tiles and parapet with it. But on the opposite side of the street, the roof in shadow, facing north, had kept its snow a full week longer, melting quietly, sinking away into the gutters, washing the grimy tiles rather than destroying them.

The builders found very much less to do, but they made the most of it by going carefully over the whole surface, and brushing out the crevices and gulleys, and the rickety gutters. On the second day, when the three men were sitting round their

brazier, drinking tea at the lunch break, one of them fumbled in the pocket of his working coat.

"Take a look at these," he said. "I can't make 'em out."

His companion peered into his large palm.

"Bones," said one of them.

"That's what I thought. But what of?"

"Rabbit, from the size."

This suggestion was ridiculed.

"Ever see a rabbit with legs that size? What's the square ones, then?"

"Backbone."

"Go on. Rabbit's spine's got spikes out of it. Don't I know? Stopped one in a bad tooth, once. Crumbs! It didn't 'alf give me gip."

"Could be mutton bones," said the third man, holding out his hand for the relics. "Knuckle bones and that, I mean."

He considered them, with his head on one side, shaking it gently as he gave up this theory. "Not the long ones, I mean. More like chicken legs."

"Who'd ' ave chicken bones to throw away in these parts?" said the first man. "That was why I said rabbit in the first place."

"Rabbit, my foot. Who's ever seen rabbit bones the thickness of a finger?"

He broke off short, looking down at the small straight bones, four of them, of unequal sizes, slim in the middle, and puffy at the ends.

"Finger," echoed his neighbour, who had not yet spoken. This was a building apprentice, supposed to be learning his trade; in actual fact, he spent most of his time looking after the brazier in the door of the working tent, and boiling kettles of water for tea.

The man who held the bones poured them rather quickly into this boy's hand. He slapped his palms together, as if he felt some contamination.

"Anyone object if I keep these?" the youth went on. He was met by a few grunts and one derisory laugh.

"Going in for natural history?" asked the man who had discovered them. "Making a collection?"

"No. But a pal of mine does."

"O.K. son. They're all yours. I'll look out for more when I go up again."

He had spoken in jest, but at the end of the afternoon he called the apprentice over and gave him a further handful of relics.

"Whoever lives in the attics up there has a mania for rabbit or chicken, or whatever it is," he said. "I've a good mind to tell the owner. Chucking all that rubbish up on the roof. Might block the drains, after a storm."

"The snow left them there," said the apprentice, and added, "I don't think it's rabbit or chicken, but Len will know."

"You ask him," said the builder's man. "I bet he'll surprise you."

The boy said nothing. Len might surprise him, but he knew what he thought. It was not for nothing that he had helped Len with his anatomy. He took his handful of bones along to Len's digs that night.

"If they aren't human, I'm as good as ploughed already," said Len, laying the bones in a row on his tablecloth. "Four phalanges, all from different fingers, two of them not complete. One scaphoid, and the lower ends of an ulna and radius, still joined by ligament. Where did you say you'd found them?"

"I didn't. Gossage, one of the bricklayers, did. I guessed as soon as I saw them, from knowing your pictures and that."

"How'd they get there?"

"I wouldn't know," said Bob, slowly. "And I wouldn't care to ask."

The two youths stared at each other. Then Len drew the relics towards him.

"Mind if I keep them?"

"What for?"

"I want to know if I'm right, I'll ask the expert."

"Do you mean the professor?"

Bob was impressed whenever he listened to his friend's description of the University and its inmates.

"No. He'd want to know too much. I'll ask Ridgeway."

"Who's he?"

"Junior demonstrator. Good bloke. Likes us to ask questions, but doesn't drown you in the answers."

The next morning, however, Len found himself quite out of his

depth in face of the combined questions of the junior demonstrator, the senior demonstrator, and finally the professor himself. They were all agreed that the bones had undoubtedly belonged to a human hand and arm, and that the strange circumstances of their discovery needed further explaining. Len was asked to produce the friend who had brought the odd collection to him. Bob was next persuaded to give his own account.

"Then we must certainly inform the police," the professor decided, in conference with his colleagues. "These boys are quite serious. I thought at first they were trying to put something over, but I am quite sure now they are speaking the plain truth. Human bones don't find their way by themselves on to the roof of a small house in a poor area. Someone put them there."

"A someone who presumably had a good many more bones in his possession," suggested the senior demonstrator.

"Possibly."

"Couldn't they belong to a medical student's outfit, or to someone who makes up skeletons for medical schools and students?" asked the other demonstrator.

"Possibly." The professor repeated his usual qualified agreement. "Very possibly. Though they don't look quite like prepared bones. That might, of course, be due to weathering from exposure."

"They turned up after the snow. They certainly underwent weathering."

"The police must find the answers to these questions," said the professor. "It is their job, not ours."

Scotland Yard followed the same mental track as the professor and his colleagues. They too decided that the bones were human and needed explaining; that the boys were serious and spoke the truth; and that Gossage had really found the relics on the roof of Number Twelve, Waterbury Street, Lambeth.

Under cover of an inspection of the roofs of the whole block, undertaken by the Borough engineer, with detectives in train, it was established that no other bones were hidden there. It remained to be discovered how the original ones got to the place where Gossage found them.

Number Twelve, Waterbury Street, was occupied by a porter who worked at Waterloo Station, his wife, and three children. They had lived in the house for six years; they did not take lodgers. As far as they knew they were not aware of any medical students having lodgings in that street. The next-door neighbour but one, a Mrs. West, a widow, let rooms.

Mrs. West lived at Number Eight, in the ground-floor front, which she used as a bed-sitting room in order to be able to take the maximum number of lodgers, one in each room. They were all businessmen and girls, she said. They were out at work, too. Yes, she had had one or two changes lately. Miss Niven had refused to get rid of her Sealyham, though it had the mange and might infect her, Mrs. West's, cat Fluff. So Miss Niven and the Sealyham had to get out together. Then there was old Mrs. Parker, who had died, and Mr. Parker had gone away to live with a married son who could get on with his father but had always refused to take in both his parents, because his mother was spiteful to her grandchildren.

"Did this old woman die in the house?"

"Good gracious, no! Up at Thomas's. What is all this, anyway?"

The question was asked again by the young detective sergeant who accompanied Inspector Cole. They had listened patiently to Mrs. West's complaints, and to her surprise that a medical student from Thomas's should be somehow mixed up with the law. Doctors, she always thought, were above that kind of thing.

"What *is* all this, anyway?" asked the sergeant.

"A very cold trail to begin with," answered Inspector Cole. "A chap called Gossage, a builder's man, found a few small human bones on the roof of Number Twelve."

"D'you mean a child's bones?"

"No. They say they're some of the bones of the hand and arm, probably a woman's. Possibly anatomical specimens of some sort. Hence the thin excuse, asking for a medical student. Just conceivably we are on to a crime. Since you can't walk into a house and ask if anyone has been chopped up there, and scattered about the roof, I am still using the medical student as an opening gambit. If a real live one should turn up, I can ask him if he possesses a skeleton, anatomy-school type."

"Why should he put some of it on the roof?"

"Can't think. Students' rag, perhaps."

"You don't really think these bones are anatomy ones, do you, sir?"

"Can you think of any other rational explanation? Do you suggest these few bones were carelessly thrown out of the upper storey, when the whole of the rest of a body had been mysteriously and secretly disposed of without anyone in the street coming to know of it?"

"I don't see how anyone could throw bones *up* on to the roof from the top storey of these houses. The gulleys run the wrong way."

"Quite right. They couldn't. Would you suggest they were dropped from an aeroplane? Should we search for the other remains in Kent, or Timbuctoo?"

The sergeant was silent. It was plain to him that Inspector Cole had no ideas, and very little enthusiasm, for his present assignment.

Numbers Six and Four added nothing to the inquiry. The sergeant suggested trying on the other side of Number Twelve. As they went back along the street Inspector Cole stopped and said, "We missed Number Ten."

"Sir?"

"We left out Number Ten. The porter's wife in Twelve said next door but one. We didn't try Ten."

An elderly woman, very neatly dressed, opened the door to them.

"Are you police officers?" she said at once. "I thought you must be. Please come in."

Feeling somewhat subdued, for he had hardly spoken a word, Inspector Cole, with his companion following, went into the small front parlour, which smelled strongly of floor polish, cabbage water, and cats.

"I have been watching you going up the street," she said. "I was wondering why you didn't go there direct."

"Go where?"

"To Mrs. Hunt's. Haven't you come about the assault?"

"Actually, no," said Inspector Cole, carefully. "What assault was this?"

"She went for him," said the old lady, with shining eyes. "They were going to turn off her electricity on account of her

not paying the bill, and she was yelling it wasn't fair, it wasn't her account at all, it was the lodger's that had left and landed her with it. I always knew pride would come before a fall," she finished complacently.

"Do you have electricity in these houses?" asked the inspector. It was an old-fashioned street of mean mid-Victorian dwellings. Such places usually had gas, or even oil lamps.

"They put it in one end, after we were rebuilt after the bombing," the old lady answered proudly.

"Why did you think we wanted to see you?" asked the inspector. "You were not in this quarrel, surely?"

"Of course not. But when I saw her run down the steps after the man from the Electricity Board had cut off her supply, and when I heard the smack as she hit him in the face, I went out to restrain her from doing herself any more harm. I might as well have tried to stop a hurricane. She was standing there screaming that it wasn't fair, she'd never ordered the refrigerator anyway, and he'd only left her the money to pay for his having it put in, not the current it had used. Only she added some very bad words all through what she said, which I won't repeat, though I expect they wouldn't surprise you."

"Was this a lodger at Number … which number is Mrs. Hunt's?"

"Sixteen."

Her eyes rested on them both suspiciously.

"Haven't you come for Mrs. Hunt?"

"Tell me about the lodger," said the inspector, persuasively. "Why did he have a refrigerator?"

"For his trade."

"His trade?"

"Mr. Rust was a cat's-meat man. You've never heard of him, have you? You've been taking me in! You aren't police officers, after all. What have I been saying? Don't kill me! I haven't any money! I swear it! God help me, who are you? *Who are you*?"

"Balmy, I should think," said Inspector Cole, as, after pacifying the old lady as best he could, he and the sergeant moved away from her door. "That's the style they go on like, as a rule. Want to tell you some cock-and-bull story, and then get frightened

about nothing."

"She's watching us out of the window, still," said the sergeant. "Talking to herself, too, by the look of it. Round the bend, as you say, sir."

"We'll try the houses in turn," went on Inspector Cole, stopping a little further on. "Fourteen before Sixteen."

They had to stand for some minutes at the door of Number Fourteen before it was opened to them. Even then, only a mere slit appeared, through which a timid voice said, "No hawkers, no circulars, no agents."

"Well, we aren't," said Inspector Cole, leaning a little on the door to widen the gap. "May we have a word with you, please? Police officers."

The door was released abruptly, so that the inspector nearly fell forward into the dark little hall of the house. A thin young man with hair drooping over his forehead stepped back as the two men drew close.

"What do you want? Mrs. Field is out."

"That the owner of the house?"

"Yes. Shopping."

"You her son?"

"Good heavens, no. I rent a room here. Upstairs, back."

"Can I have a word with you?"

"Why me? I know I haven't attended my lectures this week, but that's not illegal, is it? I wasn't in the rag at all. I don't even know who it was painted the statue, and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"The amount of undisclosed crime in this street is something astonishing," said the inspector, grimly.

"I tell you I had nothing to do with it."

Disregarding this protest, which seemed to Cole to be futile to the point of witlessness, he motioned to the young man to show the way to his room. The other, after hesitating, turned about, and led them up the stairs.

"From information received," began the inspector, while the sergeant quietly closed the door, "we have been given to understand that your neighbour has shown violence to an official of the Electricity Board, calling at her house."

"Mrs. Hunt? Who told you? The old mad woman at Number Ten?"

“Never mind that,” said the inspector, annoyed by the promptness of this response. “Is it true?”

“No. At least—”

“At least, what?”

“There were words, I’ve been told. I was working in the lab pretty hard all that week—”

“Are you a student at London University?”

“Yes. Chemistry. My second—”

“I’ll go into that later. About Mrs. Hunt. Can you tell me anything about this alleged quarrel?”

“Only at second-hand.”

“It’ll do for the present.”

“Well, then. It was over a refrig. Some lodger of hers had a refrig. Or rather, hired one, so they say. There was some talk about it at the time he went to Mrs. Hunt’s, on account of her being the last house in the row to get the electricity, after they rebuilt the houses, since the war. Something to do with the mains, and the way they run now. I never tried to understand it. Our end of the street—I mean, from Mrs. Hunt’s going up this way, was rebuilt a couple of years previously to that end, and was supplied with gas, like it had been before. Usual muddle.”

“Go on,” said Inspector Cole.

Muddle, he thought, was not confined to the bureaucracy. He foresaw a long-winded tale, so he gazed out the little window over an expanse of mean roofs, where chimney stacks of irregular shape and size stood up like the severed trunks of a coppice of small trees.

“He wasn’t there so long, either. Came a month before Christmas and left in the New Year.”

“Did he quarrel *often* with Mrs. Hunt?”

The chemistry student stared at him.

“He didn’t quarrel with her at all. Not that I know of. There was no talk of any such thing. That was after he’d gone. After the hiring firm went to collect the refrig, too. That was when it started. Mrs. Hunt argued with them first; said they couldn’t take it back till he’d paid her for the current he’d used. They said he’d paid them up his hire instalments, and ended the contract, and it was their property, not hers, and they were going to take it. She tried to stop them. But they never came to blows. As far as I know.”

“It was the Electricity Board’s representative the old lady mentioned.”

“Oh, them. I did hear something of that from Mrs. Field. Tried to stop the bloke cutting her off. He agreed to call back if she’d go straight down and pay for it. Which she did, I believe.”

He moved across the room to stand beside the inspector.

“What do you really want to know?” he asked.

Inspector Cole laughed.

“I wish I could tell you,” he said.

The young man looked both offended and suspicious.

“You won’t find anything wrong at Mrs. Hunt’s,” he said. “This is a quiet neighbourhood. At least it always was, and it is again now. At least—”

He stopped again. He seemed to reach these qualifying pauses at very regular intervals.

“At least, what?” asked the inspector, patiently.

“The cats,” said the young man, pointing to the window.

He threw up the sash at the bottom and beckoned to Cole to come nearer.

“After they took the refrig away again the cats stopped making their din. Before that it was getting chronic. I wonder the old woman at Number Ten didn’t mention it. Only she’s mad on cats, herself.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“It’s my belief he put out some for the local cats. To get rid of his surplus, perhaps. Only of course he had the refrig.”

“Who had?”

“The cat’s-meat chap at Mrs. Hunt’s. You wouldn’t credit the row they made, every evening, almost, while he was there. And chasing one another half the night, and snarling and yelling and fighting. I noticed it, of course, my window being placed as it is. I’d have thought the old woman would have mentioned it.”

“Sir,” said the sergeant, sharply.

Inspector Cole, who was leaning out the window, pulled in his head, and looked at his subordinate. The sergeant’s face was rather pale, and he breathed deeply.

“Yes, Rivers,” said the inspector. “It’s a possibility.”

Thanking the student of chemistry, he made his way down the stairs and out into the street, followed by his subordinate. They moved next door to Mrs. Hunt’s, and the inspector applied

himself to the knocker. There was an electric bell, but it seemed to be out of order.

"Cats," murmured Cole, gazing at the roofs of the houses opposite.

"Were they really proved to be *human* bones?" asked Detective Sergeant Rivers, with a certain shrinking in his voice.

"Yes," said the inspector, and added, as footsteps could be heard approaching the door. "A queer business altogether, come to think of it."

II

Mrs. Hunt did not in the least resent their visit. She presented herself to the guardians of the law as a woman wronged, and one who expected, even demanded, a sympathetic hearing.

"I'm not surprised," she kept repeating, as she led the two officers into her brightly decorated sitting-room. "A criminal type. The smooth kind. I'm not often in, but I was at fault this time. I'd believe anything of him now. I'm not at all surprised."

"Can we have a few facts?" asked Inspector Cole, taking a grip on himself.

"What's he done now?" asked Mrs. Hunt. "Imposed on some other poor widow, I expect. I must say he paid his rent regular, and always quiet and respectable-looking. Have your arrested him?"

"You can help us best," said Inspector Cole, ignoring this outpouring, "by answering a few questions I should like to put to you about Mr. Rust."

Seeing in Mrs. Hunt's eager expression that the flood waters were gathering again, he went on rapidly, "What was his full name?"

"Harold Rust, as far as I know."

"Did you board him? I mean, did you have his ration book?"

"Oh, no. My lodgers cater for themselves. They are out all day. I see to their rooms if they require it. Extra charge, of course."

"Of course," said the inspector. He was a middle-aged man, and remembered the boardinghouse of his youth, where he had been housed, fed, and waited on at table into the bargain. And

for much less money than Mrs. Hunt's lodgers paid for the bare use of an ill-furnished room, providing their own bed linen into the bargain.

He went on, "Can you tell me the exact date when Mr. Rust came here? And how much notice you had of his coming?"

"The date was November 26th," she answered promptly. "You may be surprised I know it so pat, but I've had plenty of reason to remember it, what with the dealings I've had with the Electricity. Robbery, plain and simple. Don't talk to me about nationalization."

Nothing could have been further from Inspector Cole's intention. He pursued his own course doggedly, and managed, after much sifting, to secure the following facts.

Mr. Rust had knocked at Mrs. Hunt's front door on November 25th, between eight and nine in the evening, encouraged, he told her, by the notice in her front window saying "Rooms to Let." He had looked at her top floor back, and taken it on the spot, saying it was just the job, because it had a power point, and he needed that for his refrig. She had shown astonishment over this, and he had then explained his trade. He was a cat's-meat man. He did have a shop, but took his wares round the poorer streets on a barrow. He collected new supplies once or twice a week, at the end of the day, and brought them back to the refrig.

Mrs. Hunt, who was fond of cats, and owned a rather spoiled Blue Persian, acknowledged that she was drawn to "Pussy's butcher," especially as she saw an opportunity of getting supplies for her pet's daily dinner on her own doorstep. She had been impressed by the hygienic system Mr. Rust followed. She agreed to take him the next day, and was willing to let him have the use of her yard to keep his barrow in at night. The refrig would arrive in a day or two, she understood.

As it happened she was out when the apparatus arrived. It was a largish refrigerator, and her cleaning woman who admitted the men with it had to deal with their objection to carrying it up to Mr. Rust's room. They knew all about his being a cat's-meat man, they said, but they hadn't bargained for him living at the top of the house. However, the refrig went in, and Mr. Rust came home in the evening, this time with a sack of fresh cat's meat on his little cart. Neither Mrs. Hunt nor her helper realized

that the refrigerator was hired.

"You did not know that until the hiring firm came to take it away?" asked the inspector.

"That's about it" Mrs. Hunt's eyes gleamed with anger, as she remembered her defeat. "He paid his rent as usual, and went off with his cart as usual, not saying a word. He must have had 'is things on the cart under the sacks. Because I never set eyes on 'im from that day to this."

"He left no address, of course?"

"I've told you. He never even said 'e was going. Address indeed! Vanished into the blue is more like it. And left the electricity unpaid for."

"How was that? Don't you have separate meters for the rooms?"

"No. Fixed charge. Saves them always coming to me for shillings. I like them to have electric fires, on account of saving work, and as I put the fires in, see, I can charge for their use."

"Make a bit of profit, too, eh?" said Inspector Cole.

"And why not? Don't I provide accommodation?"

"Oh, by all means. So you had a bit of a shock when the hiring company arrived? You thought you were covered by the refrig, or even, perhaps, going to make a bit out of it?"

This was so near the bone that Mrs. Hunt's expression became quite savage. She launched into a long tirade against Mr. Rust, his deception and double-dealing. Evidently she had been inclined to like him before his strange departure and unexpected betrayal. This led the inspector to ask, "What kind of man is this Mr. Rust? Tell me about him."

She hesitated. Natural inclination fought with outraged memory.

"Some people would call him good-looking, I suppose. Not my type at all. Nothing special, really."

"What about his colouring? His height, build, and that sort of thing?"

"Ordinary. I don't remember what colour his eyes were. Brownish hair, like most men. Not bald at all. He was taller than me, not so tall as you. More the height of the young chap over there."

The young chap, who was Detective-Sergeant Rivers, looked resentful, but said nothing. He had been upstairs to examine the

room Mr. Rust had occupied, and he was waiting eagerly to report to his superior. But Cole went on perseveringly.

"You haven't told me his age, or his apparent age."

"Not in his first youth. Not old, either. Thirty-eight to forty, I should think, though he wasn't grey at all. Clean-shaved."

"What was the name of the company that hired the refrig?" Cole asked. Mr. Rust's appearance seemed to be so ordinary it was no use asking for more detail.

"I don't remember."

"Oh, come now!"

"I don't. Honest, I don't." Mrs. Hunt was indignant. "I was too upset. I told you my woman took it in, and when they came for it, and he hadn't paid his bill for the current, I just blew up. I never asked the name, and they didn't show no papers, because 'e had settled up with them. I never noticed the name on the van. I was thankful to see the back of them at the last. I just shut my door in their faces, and had a good cry. So I don't know who they were from Adam. I can't tell you. I wish I could."

Inspector Cole and Rivers stood just inside the window of the top-floor back at Number Sixteen, Waterbury Street. They had the lower sash thrown up and were carefully wiping away the grime from the sill with a damp rag.

"You were right," said the inspector. "These stains are in the wood, and they don't rub off."

Rivers produced the sharp blade of a knife.

"Take a little shaving," said the inspector. "And rub the place over with dirt again, so the old girl downstairs won't notice. She thinks it's a fraud we're after. She'd be unmanageable if she knew—"

His voice died away.

"I never did much like cats," said Rivers between his teeth, as he lifted the rusty-looking bit of wood and folded it carefully away in a clean piece of paper. "How long would it take to dispose of?"

"Depend on trade," said Cole grimly. "He seems to have been six weeks on the job, all told. But we don't know anything for certain yet."

"It ought to be easy enough to get the firm that supplied the

refrig."

"You'd think so."

But it wasn't. Inquiries, employing first one method and then another, proved quite fruitless. The Yard grew piqued, then angry. Someone must have hired a refrigerator to Harold Rust. Unless—

"How do we know he wasn't hiring it to himself? That he wasn't really the hiring firm? We haven't the foggiest idea who he was, or what his real trade was."

"No. And from Mrs. Hunt's description he sounds very superior for a cat's-meat man."

"That's what I mean. On the face of it, he might simply be a genuine trader, who left his lodgings for no apparent reason. I'd suspect an accident, if he hadn't paid off his hiring bill and taken his possessions away in secret. Even so, a suicide is not out of the question. Only, we have no evidence of one."

"Funny Mrs. Hunt didn't suspect him, from his superior manners."

"He obviously had some kind of personal attraction for her. Flattered her, probably; made much of her. The whole set-up would have seemed fishy to any woman of Mrs. Hunt's usual shrewdness. She must have fallen for him at the start."

Mr. Rust's identity proved elusive in other respects. No amount of inquiry was able to connect him with the cat's-meat trade on the one hand, or on the other with the general body of street traders. His name occurred in no list of licensed hawkers, nor was he a customer of any of the known reputable sources of meat for animal consumption. While further samples of material from the window ledges and adjacent roofs on Waterbury Street were being examined scientifically, Inspector Cole continued to make his inquiries. Finally he was called to a conference where he found Detective-Superintendent Mitchell, and also a senior colleague, whom he knew as Bob, but whose other name was Johnson.

Mitchell greeted him with a look of approval.

"It *was* blood on that window ledge," he said. "And human at that. So the bones were probably not a medical student's study set, unless we have a very queer coincidence at work."

"Coupled with the fact that there hasn't been a medical student in any of the houses in the street, nor anyone remotely connected with a hospital."

"Medical school, you mean. Not quite the same thing. Your chemistry boy might have medical student friends. No. The whole thing involves coincidence. This man Rust might have cut himself and bled on the window ledge. There's precious little to go on, yet. Just two main facts, that we could link together. Some human bones on the roof, and some human blood on the windowsill of a room occupied by a man purporting to sell cat's meat. Fantastic, unlikely, impossible almost, except for one more thing. Tell him, Bob."

"It's the dates," said Chief-Inspector Johnson. He told Cole the story Terry Byrnes had brought to him, and went on, "I've always believed that boy actually saw what he described to me. Now you come in with this tale of a highly sinister character taking a room near the Southern Region's main railroad on November 26th, and hiring a refrig a couple of days later. The lad came here with his tale on November 25th. The victim in his account was a woman. And nothing has ever been reported about her."

"Provisionally I'm adding Johnson's short file to yours," said Mitchell. "You can pool your ideas. In the meantime, you can get on with finding the firm where Rust hired his refrig. We *must* examine the machine itself. It'll have been out to someone else, I don't doubt; probably still is, but we might, with luck, get something from it. If a large quantity of—er—meat, was stuffed into it, there might be a trace or two the ordinary householder won't have cleaned off."

His hearers' faces discouraged him from enlarging his theme. Cole pulled a list from his pocket and laid it before Mitchell.

"It occurred to me Rust might have used an alias for the purpose of hiring. Mrs. Hunt is certain the refrig was delivered to Mr. Rust by name, but she was out, and her cleaner simply says the men asked for Rust. They might have been told that was the landlady's name. Mrs. Hunt was too angry to look at anything when they called to remove the thing. I'm working on the address now rather than the name. If I get the firm that supplied the refrig I might get the source of the supplies of cat's meat, supposing the man used the same name for that."

“It is just possible this man Rust did not know what he was doing. He may have been employed to sell the meat. Always supposing he had some genuine cat’s meat to sell. Again, there are plenty of illicit wholesalers and we shan’t draw them, whatever we do.”

“Wholesalers of what?” protested Chief-Inspector Johnson. “What are we getting at? Organized murder?”

“If you’re thinking of thugs,” said Mitchell, “it’s not here; it’s India. Or was.”

“I wasn’t. I was thinking of Edgar Allan Poe.”

“Well, I’d rather you’d leave off the high-brow act and concentrate on Waterbury Street. And fast. We’re getting too well known there.”

Inspector Cole nodded.

“I noticed one or two Press boys around when I came out of Number Sixteen. If they get a start from the old woman in Ten, there won’t be much harm done, but the lad with the jitters in Twelve might put them wise to a thing or two.”

A couple of days later, Mitchell’s fears were realized, but not at all as he had expected.

The article was headed “Cats.” But it was no nature story. It had for its subject the cats of London, and the treatment was sociological. There were thousands of cats, it stated; wild cats, unowned or unacknowledged cats; roaming the rooftops, terrorizing their well-fed, well-behaved brothers and sisters who stayed at home, preying on any small animal or bird they could capture; savage, raucous, half starved, lustful, belligerent. Why did we tolerate these pests? the article inquired. They were dangerous to babies and animal pets; they destroyed town gardens and window boxes, they might spread disease, they had a high nuisance-value, especially at night. Here the article quoted a story from Waterbury Street, of bedlam on the rooftops, and another from the same source describing a tender-hearted cat’s-meat man at the end of his day’s work. “I asked him not to put any out for the strays,” said vivacious dark-haired Mrs. Hunt, “but he always said they were welcome to the surplus. And they certainly made the most of it. Swarmed round his window well before he came in from work, and scampered

down to the barrow, when they heard him shut the yard door." "We should like to know," the article asked sternly, "where these street traders get their supplies of meat, and how they can afford to be so lavish with them, handing the surplus to strays and encouraging an undesirable parasite population that fouls our roofs and back yards and adds to the nerve-racking sum of unnecessary noise in the Metropolis."

Superintendent Mitchell gave a sigh of relief when he read this outburst. Not a word of human bones or police inquiries. The end of it, which he did not bother to read all through, was the old story of the worn-out horse, pitiful victim of man's lowest form of brutality. It had cropped up every few years for as long as he could remember.

Unfortunately, the matter did not rest there. Cole and Johnson, spurred now by the joint nature of their search, made further visits in Waterbury Street. They found that Mr. Rust used to go out at seven in the morning and come in at seven in the evening. He was always alone. No one in the street had ever seen him in company with man, woman, or child. He took his little handcart away in the morning, and brought it back at night. He had empty sacks on it and a weighing machine and a quantity of clean newspaper. When he came in he had no newspaper and one sack was filled with the meat for the following day.

The Press noticed the two police officers. They had seen them before. They wanted to know if the cat's meat was the object in view. Cole and Johnson put them off with vague answers. This only made them keener. They scented a mystery, and Mrs. Hunt's bitter, but vague, accusations confirmed it. Though editors gave up the story as a dead one, one young and energetic journalist went down to Waterbury Street as often as he could find time. He leaned on the bar of the Fish and Hook, not far from the river, where he knew several Waterbury people were always to be found. He encouraged them to talk about Mrs. Hunt's lodgers. He brought in the name of Harold Rust. And he discovered that the man had made almost no impression upon anyone but his landlady. It was not that he had never patronized the Fish and Hook. He had been seen there quite often, drinking a quiet pint, and was always willing to exchange a few words, but beyond that, no one had anything to say of him. No one had

been surprised to hear he had gone. Mrs. Hunt's short temper was well known; the journalist was told that none of her lodgers stayed with her very long. The man Rust had put up with her rather longer than most. But then he really only slept there; he was away the whole day. No one had got to know him, or wanted to do so. More important than all this, no one had ever bought his cat's meat. No one, the journalist found, of all the people he managed to ask, who lived within a mile or so of Waterbury Street, except Mrs. Hunt herself, had ever bought a pennyworth of cat's meat from Mr. Rust, or indeed had ever seen a man with a little cart, a weighing machine, and a thick pile of clean newspaper.

So what? the young journalist's sub-editor wanted to know. Well, so what was the set-up in aid of? Was Rust really a cat's-meat trader at all? Or was it a cover for something else? Black market, suggested the editor, reminding his junior that the man had undoubtedly brought meat into Mrs. Hunt's house and stored it in a refrigerator. Black-market meat? The young man reluctantly agreed this was possible.

"Only, I was wondering if the whole thing wasn't a blind. The police were after him for something."

"Have we asked them?"

"I don't know."

But the police had no information for the Press. There was no "case" in Waterbury Street, only a routine set of inquiries from information received. No, the police had nothing to say about this information.

The thing was dropped, until a further indignant letter on the subject of worn-out horses arrived at the newspaper office where the young journalist worked. The same sub-editor had it pointed out to him; he remembered the curious story; it had stayed in his mind, because of the young man's keenness. So the letter was printed with a brief commentary, which set out some of the underground and unsavoury channels by which meat, both for animals and humans, was distributed throughout the country to those who were willing to pay for it and ask no questions. Among several thinly disguised examples of dishonest trading was mentioned the case of "H.R., the disappearing cat's-meat man." This fellow, it was suggested, moved his quarters at short intervals, to avoid attracting attention. Though he ostensibly

sold cat's meat, no one was known to have seen, much less bought, his wares. What, precisely, did he sell, and where did he get it? The short article ended with a half accusing, half pitying, comment on the shortage of police in the Metropolis, and their preoccupation with the minor offences of motorists.

"We'll never catch up on him now," said Johnson to Cole, pointing out this paragraph. "We never had much of a trail, but he'll go to ground now, good and proper."

In the sense in which Chief-Inspector Johnson spoke, the man who read the same article took action. Or rather decided upon the course he must take. He considered it, quite rightly, as a warning. He cursed the animal lovers and their interference, that had so unluckily started this partial exposure. It was something he had not imagined possible. He had thought himself utterly, fantastically, remote from every kind of inquiry.

But what he did not understand was himself. He knew he was resourceful, but he did not know he was not thorough. He knew he was inventive, but not that he was careless about details. He knew he had imaginative grasp, but not that his imagination touched only himself. So he did not remember that he had failed to pay Mrs. Hunt for the extra current the refrigerator had used. He thought his plan, his admirable plan, for the disposal of a human body, had worked perfectly, because it was planned perfectly. Everything he had done was open, honest, and ordinary. So he thought, forgetting Mrs. Hunt's way of managing her electricity bill.

It was a shock to see his assumed initials in print, even though he could never be traced by them. He had invented the name of Harold Rust for the cat's-meat man, and he would never be a cat's-meat man again. But he resented the publicity given to even such a fictitious character as Harold Rust. It meant that Mrs. Hunt had taken more interest in him than was altogether healthy.

As the police expected, the man made up his mind to cover his tracks afresh. But here he made his biggest mistake. He had already slipped up several times, not only over the business of the electricity. But the major mistake, the great error in basic strategy, took place as a direct result of reading the article in the

newspaper.

So the credit for his ultimate downfall should go, perhaps, to the young journalist, though he had no further connection whatever with the case.

3 The Absent Friend

I

Janet Lapthorn was worried. That was bad enough, because she was the kind of woman who did not feel she was pulling her weight in the world unless the solving of her problems "took it out of her." And so an outside anxiety, added to her usual personal strife, meant that her nerves were twitched and jangled more stridently with every day that passed.

What made her new, absorbing worry insupportable, was her helplessness in face of it. Here was the genuine thing; an unease for which she had no remedy. It made her home-brewed, artificially forced, troubles look rather silly. And she resented this very bitterly.

"Felicity can't be too busy," she argued with her husband. "She can't have nearly as much to do now she's left Alastair as she did before, running the house for him."

Seeing her husband was obstinately reading his evening paper, she went on, "I know you don't approve of what she's done, but I can't be disloyal myself, after all these years."

The silence continued, so she added loudly, "*Can I*?"

This made Jack Lapthorn jump.

"Can you what?" he asked mildly.

"Let Felicity down."

"Oh, Felicity—"

"Don't pretend you didn't know I was talking about her."

"As far as I'm concerned, it's she who has let you down—and Alastair even more so. However, we've been over all that," he added quickly, hoping to avoid a further fruitless argument. "So it just boils down to this, doesn't it? Felicity has stopped answering your letters."

"Or been prevented."

"How?"

"I don't know."

Jack Lapthorn put down his newspaper thoughtfully.

"You never met her … this chap she's bolted with?"

"No."

Not for the first time Janet reflected that her husband had an uncomfortable talent for humiliating her.

"No. She said she wanted me to meet him after they were married."

"That means she is expecting a divorce."

"I suppose so. Alastair wouldn't be so mean as to refuse one."

"There *is* another point of view. He may consider the affair too flimsy to last, and not worth divorcing her for."

"Too flimsy! Considering it has gone on since this time last year, just about! And she left him in July."

"He may be going on what he knows of the other man. Trying to save her from future trouble. He's absolutely nuts about her, and terribly possessive. Always was."

"I shall write to him. I wish we lived at Boxwood still. I've always regretted leaving there."

Jack did not answer this. The move to Romford had meant promotion, so naturally he did not regret it. Women were queer about these things. Janet had worried her head off when promotion didn't seem to be on the way. Since the move she had been one long grumble over all she missed from their earlier days.

"I shall write to him," repeated Janet, and taking her husband's continued silence as a form of disapproval, went to her desk, found notepaper and pen, and settled down to defy him, without delay.

After two weeks of impatient waiting an answer came. A friendly letter, explaining that Felicity was in Scotland, looking after an old school friend, who was convalescent from an operation and had no regular help in the house.

This letter annoyed Janet very much. Alastair must know she was Felicity's best friend. His bland assumption of her ignorance, and the implication that an earlier friend had prior claim on her affections, galled her not a little. She wrote again, more tartly, but still with caution, not mentioning her knowledge of the truth. She thanked him for his letter, pointing out that he had failed to give her Felicity's address.

Again Alastair Hilton wrote a friendly little note, but again it told Janet nothing. Nothing, that is to say, beyond the bare fact that Felicity was still away. There was no mention of Peter; she

had not really expected it. But there was nothing, absolutely nothing, about Felicity's true whereabouts. No address, not even the name of the town or district in Scotland where she was supposed to be. And no surprise at Janet's complaint. He did not seem to mind that Felicity had cut herself off, not only from her husband and her home, but also from her best friend. There was no news about Boxwood, or their mutual friends, there. No mention of his chief hobby, no reference even to the Archaeological Society's branch to which he belonged, and whose meetings he was given to describing at quite boring length. He sent his regards to Jack and herself. He was hers ever —Alastair.

"Too proud to complain," said Jack. "Very like him, poor beggar."

"I can't think what's happened."

"I can. Felicity has put herself beyond the pale, and she prefers not to have contacts with the world she has left."

"That's nonsense. It sounds just like an Edwardian play. Heavy moustaches and boaters. Oh, I don't know how I can make jokes when I'm so dreadfully worried."

"Don't make jokes, then. Go and make tea."

"It's all very well for you to jeer. I'm fond of Felicity."

"Damn Felicity!"

"All right. I'm sorry. You'll have to make your own tea, I'm going out. I'll put the kettle on for you."

"What the hell—Janet, come back. Janet!"

But he was not answered, and presently a clatter of heels on the stairs told him that not only was Janet really going to desert him, but she had put on her best patent-leather court shoes to do it in. And that meant the feather hat and the black town suit. It was an outsize worry that was eating her this time, he reflected sadly. Deserted at four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. He did not know where Janet had gone, but he guessed London. It would take her a good hour to get there. He imagined she had gone up to find Felicity. If found, they might natter till midnight. He resigned himself to a dull evening, getting his own food, doing his own washing-up. But after two minutes of false resignation he rang up a friend and arranged to meet him at a local hotel in a couple of hours' time.

Meanwhile Janet Lapthorn travelled to London in a state of seething impatience. She had very little idea how she should act, but *something must be done*. The trouble was that Felicity had been so very secretive. When they met it was always at a theatre or a restaurant, and Janet had never known exactly where her friend was living, though she understood that there had been several moves. Landladies were always curious, Felicity had told her, and often suspicious. Though she and Peter were careful never to discuss their problems at their lodgings, unpleasantness usually broke out sooner or later. That was why Felicity insisted upon Janet addressing her letters to the Charing Cross Post Office. The system had worked quite well. Until Felicity had stopped writing.

Janet thought hard about these letters she had written. Could anything she had said have given offence to her friend? She had offered advice from time to time, certainly. But it had been genuine advice, given tactfully, she was sure. Felicity had often asked for her advice when they both lived at Boxwood. In fact she had been a perfectly reasonable being until she met this Peter fellow.

Janet sighed. It was no good going over and over the same ground; it was getting her nowhere at all. And it made her head ache and her heart pound uncomfortably. But she still had no idea what she would do when she got to Liverpool Street Station, nor how she would set about tracing her friend.

In the end she did the only thing open to her, apart from taking the next train back to Romford. She boarded a bus for the Strand, and made her way to Charing Cross Post Office.

First she asked if there were any letters for Mrs. Hilton. The girl went away and came back to inquire for the initial, if any.

"F," said Janet, without thinking, and then added, "or more likely A."

The girl stared at her, but went away again and came back with three letters. They were the last three that Janet had written, one at the end of January, and the other two in February.

"Is that all?" she asked, confusedly. She was trying to remember how many more unanswered letters she had written; she was sure there had been more than three.

"F or A Hilton? That's all. Only those three for A. None for F,"

said the girl.

"It's the same. I mean—the same person—Christian name, or husband's initials," Janet tried to explain.

The girl was entirely indifferent. She looked away across the Post Office, stretching her hand towards Janet without looking at her. "Have you got your identity card?"

"No. We don't have to have them now."

"Ration book?"

"No." Janet wanted her letters back. "It's not in this bag," she added truthfully. "I didn't think it was necessary."

This also was true: she had not thought at all.

The girl pushed the letters under the grille. That business of showing an identity card was always pretty silly, she thought. Anyone could fake the right name if it was worth it. Or reel off a number she couldn't check.

"Thank you," said Janet, calmly, she hoped, and thrust the letters into her bag.

When she reached the door of the Post Office she stopped. She wanted to ask if the girl remembered anyone else asking for letters addressed to F. or A. Hilton. But that would mean confessing her deception and losing her prize. She had another and an urgent use for the letters. She walked away in the direction of Whitehall.

"You say these three letters are not the only ones to go unanswered?"

said the detective-sergeant who had been detailed to hear Mrs. Lapthorn's complaint.

"No. By no means. I have had no replies for at least four months."

"How often did you write?"

"About every two weeks. Sometimes oftener, if we were arranging to meet."

"You have not met since she stopped writing?"

"Naturally not."

"There are telephones," said the detective-sergeant briskly. He thought he knew the scandal-mongering, rumour-spreading type to which his visitor belonged.

"Of course. But she never seems to live where there is one. Now, I mean. Since she left her husband."

"Did you ask at the Post Office what had happened to the other letters?"

"No. I was too confused and upset."

"They were not returned to you?"

"No. If they had been I should have come here long ago."

"They would be returned after a suitable interval. It may not be long enough yet, but we could check it, of course. Looks as if she had collected them all, except the last three."

"Unless someone else collected them for her. I got away with these three easily enough."

"So I see. Now tell me, Mrs. Lapthorn, what exactly worries you so much? The fact that Mrs. Hilton appears to have given you up, or the fact that her husband is not prepared to confide in you? Or something else?"

Janet Lapthorn flushed. The officer's tone was unmistakable. He thought she was an undesirable busybody; if nothing worse.

"Felicity Hilton was a very great friend of mine," she said with dignity.

"Was?"

It had seemed natural to use the past tense, but she shivered as the police officer drew her attention to it.

"Oh, can't you see how worried I am?" she cried in desperation. "Wouldn't you be worried if a friend you saw and corresponded with regularly, at very short intervals, suddenly seemed to melt into thin air? Only it wasn't so thin about the time she disappeared." Seeing the puzzled expression on the sergeant's face, she added, "Fog, you know. Last November."

It was the combination of the two words that struck fire in the sergeant's brain. Fog. November. The list of missing persons. November. Fog.

"Excuse me," he said, rising. "I should like to get hold of someone who will be extremely interested in what you say."

Half an hour later Mrs. Lapthorn had repeated her rather scanty information to Chief-Inspector Johnson, stressing her anxiety and mounting fears. He was calm and noncommittal.

"It appears from what you tell me that this lady, Mrs. Hilton,

had left her husband for another man. She may, of course, wish to conceal her whereabouts for a variety of reasons."

"Not from me," said Janet Lapthorn fiercely. "She knew she could trust me with anything. Besides, what if I did tell Alastair, that's her husband? He must know. He's giving her an allowance."

"Do you happen to know where she banks?"

"In Boxwood it was the Westminster. But I don't know if she went to another branch or a different bank after she left."

Something might be done through the bank, thought the inspector.

"Are we sure that her husband really knows where she is? We only really know that he has not given you her address."

"Of course he knows. And he has no reason to keep it from me."

"People do not always act reasonably."

Janet glared at him. She was getting precisely nowhere; she was tired; she was hungry. Self-pity and anger overcame discretion.

"You sit there, trying to get out of making the right inquiries, when I tell you Felicity Hilton has been done away with, and most likely her husband is responsible! And you won't even listen!"

She burst into tears, not bothering even to get out her handkerchief.

Chief-Inspector Johnson was used to tears. He knew all the varieties, and was seldom moved by any. He waited patiently until his visitor recovered herself, and then changed the subject.

"Tell me, Mrs. Lapthorn, what sort of man was this—er—Peter? By the way, what is his surname?"

"I don't know."

"Then you never met him formally? I mean, no introduction or anything of that sort?"

"I never hear people's names when they are introduced."

"Quite. A good many people don't listen. So you only know him as Peter."

"I only know *of* him as Peter."

"Do you mean you have never met the man?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I have never seen him."

"And you don't know anything about him except that his first

name is Peter, and your greatest friend left her husband and home to live with this man?"

Inspector Johnson's tone was not sarcastic, but Janet Lapthorn chose to think it so. She stood up.

"Very well," she said. "If you can only sneer and doubt my word, that's the end of it. I must say I never expected to be treated like this at Scotland Yard."

Chief-Inspector Johnson also rose to his feet.

"I should like you to write once more to this Mr. Hilton," he said. "Ask him for your friend's present address. Say you are seriously worried about her. Say you feel inclined to get outside assistance in tracing her, unless he can help you. He should either give you the address, when you can go and visit her, or tell you to mind your own business. If he does that, come to me again, or better still send me his letter, and also any photographs you may have of Mrs. Hilton. Snapshots will do: they often help more than photographers' touched-up efforts. Will you do that?"

Mrs. Lapthorn nodded. She could not bring herself to answer pleasantly so soon after the man's rudeness. But she felt a little mollified.

She was too exhausted to walk back to the Strand. She hailed a taxi, and without thinking told the driver to go to Liverpool Street. She was halfway back to Romford before she remembered how hungry she was. This nearly brought on the tears again, but she held them off for Jack's sake.

When she got home and found the house in darkness, no fire, and no little supper being prepared on a tray, she broke down in earnest. But hunger triumphed over chagrin. With no audience, martyrdom was unprofitable. So she cooked herself a tasty meal of bacon and egg and mushroom, and enjoyed it in her bedroom beside the fire. Then she had a hot bath and went to bed to read her latest thriller from the Public Library, until sleep overtook her. She did not even hear Jack Lapthorn's rather uncertain arrival home, just after midnight.

During the week that followed, Janet Lapthorn occupied herself with carrying out the orders she had received at Scotland Yard. She emptied the drawers and desks in her home to find

snapshots of every kind, and managed to gather together about six prints in which not only were Felicity's features reasonably clear, but her own were sufficiently undistorted. These she laid aside to take up with her when Alastair condescended to answer her third letter. It was ten days before he did so.

"Now will you do something about it?" she said fiercely, as Chief-Inspector Johnson turned the snapshots over and over.

"What would you like us to do?"

"Arrest this man!"

"Mr. Hilton? What for?"

"For doing away with his wife, of course."

"Why do you think he has done her any harm? His letter to you merely says that she has not yet returned home."

"She never will!" cried Janet, her eyes beginning to fill. "I know she never will. She would never have stopped writing to me, or meeting me. She and I were very great friends. She told me everything—always."

"Except where she was living, and the full name of the man she was living with."

Janet Lapthorn glared at him. There was no answer to this unfeeling logic.

"Then you won't help," she said harshly, lifting her chin at the inspector, with hatred in her eyes. "You are prepared to let helpless women be murdered and take no steps whatever!"

"Once more, how do you know that Mrs. Hilton has been murdered?"

"That," said Janet with dignity, "is what *I* should be asking *you*."

Johnson was speechless. He fell back on formal evasion.

"If you will leave these photos and the letter with us," he said, "we will see what we can do. And let you know," he added hastily.

"Very well."

Janet decided that the interview was over. She pulled on her gloves and got to her feet. But on her way to the door Johnson struck one blow for himself.

"This old school friend of Mrs. Hilton's, the one she is supposed to be with in Scotland. According to her husband, I mean. Did you happen to write to her to check? You'd know who she is, of course. Did you find out if Mrs. Hilton really ever

went to her when she was ill?"

"I did not, for the very simple reason that Felicity was not in Scotland but in London, and I was seeing her frequently."

"Up to the time she stopped writing, yes. But why shouldn't she have gone to Scotland since then? Did you check that?"

"No."

"Why not? Or don't you know the school friend's address?"

"I don't. But I also think she doesn't exist."

"Because Mr. Hilton mentions her?"

"No. Because Felicity didn't. She never did. I don't believe she exists."

Janet saw the inspector's jaw tighten. But his voice was politely, frigid as he answered.

"You only confirm my opinion that Mrs. Hilton did not confide in you quite as freely and fully as you imagine."

Mrs. Lapthorn pulled open the office door before Johnson could reach it, and marched away without taking any sort of leave of him.

"There is the date," said Superintendent Mitchell. "And that's the only possible excuse. We can't really say on this Mrs. Lapthorn's evidence that the other woman is missing."

"I know that. But we still have those bones unaccounted for in any way. And a man who hired a refrig in one name and a room in another."

"Oh, you've traced the refrig, have you?"

"Yes, by the address, as I said I would. He used the name of Philip Goode and told them to ask for Mrs. Rust in Waterbury Street."

"Knowing the dim-witted daily there would conclude they meant *Mr*. Rust, since he'd warned her the refrig was coming. No trace of Philip Goode, alias Harold Rust, I suppose?"

"None. Both names probably false."

"Mrs. Lapthorn swears this Felicity called the boy friend Peter."

"You can have one crack at the husband. Just to satisfy your mind. Tell him we are prepared to get in touch with Scotland to verify his statements. Perhaps he'll cough up then. It would certainly help to know who this man Peter really is."

II

It would help a lot, Chief-Inspector Johnson decided, fastening the low gate of Willows behind him. “Peter” had become quite an obsession with him. For beyond Mrs. Janet Lapthorn’s statement, which was merely a description of her friend’s letters and conversation about the man, and therefore very second-hand, there was no real evidence that he existed at all. Felicity Hilton had not been very confiding, and that was putting it mildly. The whole thing hinged upon Felicity’s whereabouts. If she really had disappeared, if she really had a lover called Peter, then it was worth going on with inquiries. Otherwise—

The front garden of Willows was very quiet under the declining March sun. It had been a perfect spring day, and Johnson regretted having to work instead of attending to his own greenhouse and vegetable plot. Especially as he had been on duty the Saturday before and kept late by the officious Mrs. Lapthorn. The front garden at Willows seemed remote from crime of any sort. He pressed the bell, noting that it worked properly and made an adequate noise inside the house. Then he turned his back on the front door to enjoy the pale flowers of a prunus tree shining against dark red leaves in a frame of blue sky; the transparent, clear, light blue of spring and autumn that makes the heart lift. Warm enough to get the seeds in, thought the inspector, regretfully. A voice behind him said, “Did you ring?”

Johnson wheeled round, ashamed to have allowed his thoughts to drift so far away. It only went to show what he thought of this case, he decided.

“Yes, sir,” he said, briskly. “Are you Mr. Alastair Hilton?”

“I am.”

“Can I have a word with you, sir? Chief-Inspector Johnson, Scotland Yard.”

There was a moment’s hesitation, no fear, no particular curiosity either.

“Why, yes. Will you come in? My housekeeper is out shopping.”

Mr. Hilton led the way into a pleasant sitting-room with

windows on two sides of it, looking on to a small lawn surrounded by flower beds, as trim and well cared for as the front garden which the inspector had already admired.

Johnson remained standing, in spite of Mr. Hilton's offer of a chair, and so the latter also stood, leaning beside one of the open windows, and looking out of it more often than he looked at his visitor.

"I won't beat about the bush," said the inspector, trying to control a strong urge to do that very thing. "We had a Mrs. Lapthorn in to see us a week ago, with a complaint about your wife."

Mr. Hilton turned mild eyes towards the inspector.

"Janet Lapthorn is one of nature's troublemakers," he said. "She worries, and someone has to share the worry. Her husband, Jack, long ago gave up the partnership, so outside allies have to be found. I expect she has told you that my wife is missing, not to be found."

Inspector Johnson, inwardly admiring this prompt counterattack, looked severe.

"Mrs. Lapthorn complained that she had not been able to communicate with Mrs. Hilton, and that the lady had not answered her letters. At least, not since the middle of November. You probably know from Mrs. Lapthorn that she was addressing her letters to Mrs. Hilton to Charing Cross Post Office."

"I did know that."

"And she found out last week that none had been collected since last January."

"She wrote to me a day or two ago to give me that news."

"Did you answer her letter?"

"I did. Probably you have seen my answer."

"Why do you say that?"

Mr. Hilton withdrew his eyes reluctantly from the garden.

"Surely you would not be here now unless Mrs. Lapthorn had managed to convey some of her anxiety neurosis into your minds at Scotland Yard."

"I am here to discover to what extent her anxiety has a proper cause."

Mr. Hilton stood away from the window. He walked across the room to find a box of cigarettes, offered one to Johnson, who refused it, and lit one for himself.

“You must ask the questions, you know,” he said quietly.

Chief-Inspector Johnson’s jaw tightened. He had a slippery customer to deal with, he decided. If Mr. Pokerface Hilton chose to be mysterious, he could take what was coming to him.

“You have a wife, Mr. Hilton, called Felicity Clare?”

“That is so.”

“When did your wife leave home to live elsewhere?”

There was a long pause: a deepening silence.

“Mrs. Hilton is not, at present, at home,” repeated the inspector, making it a statement rather than a question.

“She is not.”

“How long has she been away?”

“She is looking after a very old school friend in Scotland.”

“That is what you wrote to Mrs. Lapthorn, at a time when the latter was sending letters to your wife addressed to Charing Cross Post Office.”

“Which you say did not reach her. Perhaps because by then she had gone to Scotland.”

“You agree, then, that Mrs. Hilton was away from home for a considerable time before going to Scotland?”

“I do not know exactly when she went to Scotland. I know only that she intended to do so.”

“Did she write to you to tell you this?”

“She did.”

“Have you kept the letter?”

“I may have done so. Is it important?”

Inspector Johnson stared at the indifferent face before him. The man was overdoing it, but this was helpful; he would break all the more readily when the right climax was reached.

“I think it may be very important. I know roughly what Mrs. Lapthorn put in her letter to you. I more or less dictated that letter. In her view Mrs. Hilton left home for one reason only. To join a man she had been associating with for some time already.”

Alastair Hilton was still standing. He had gone back to his old position near the open window. His face had grown paler, but it was still perfectly composed. And he did not answer Johnson’s implied question. He appeared not to have heard it.

The inspector waited, and then, finding the continued silence oppressive, said: “The reason for my being here must be obvious

to you. Mrs. Lapthorn came to us with certain suspicions in her mind. They may very well be groundless. I hope they are. But in your own interest as well as hers, the question she has raised must be answered. You told her your wife was nursing an old friend in Scotland. But you gave no address, either the first time you wrote this to Mrs. Lapthorn, or when she explicitly asked for it in her second and third letters to you. Quite possibly Mrs. Hilton did not want Mrs. Lapthorn to know her whereabouts. The friendship claimed by Mrs. Lapthorn may be misrepresented by her. That is something you can settle quite easily. If you will give me your wife's present address in Scotland, I will see that she is informed of Mrs. Lapthorn's concern. If you will give me the date when Mrs. Hilton left home, I can check that with Mrs. Lapthorn also."

"I suppose you are taking this up because you are afraid Janet will go to the Press if you don't."

"Certainly not."

"Then why, really, are you so interested?"

"I am not prepared to say. Certainly not before you answer my questions."

"So Janet Lapthorn thinks Felicity has disappeared, does she?"

"I am sure you know from her letter exactly what she thinks."

The conversation seemed to have gone full circle without profit to either of them. Again the inspector cursed the meagreness of his material.

"Of course, we can find out easily enough *when* your wife left home," he said. "A few inquiries among the neighbours or trades-people, starting, of course, with your housekeeper. By the way, did you employ her before your wife went away?"

"Not as housekeeper."

"Mrs. Hilton ran the place single-handed?"

"No. We had this woman who now does my housekeeping, for two hours in the morning."

"Have you had anyone to help the housekeeper?"

"Not now."

"But you did have someone?"

"Yes. I got rid of her."

"Any particular reason?"

"I considered her untrustworthy."

"Can you tell me why?"

"No."

Either the woman knew too much, or guessed too much, thought Johnson.

"Was it wise to dismiss her? From the point of view of gossip, I mean. In the circumstances."

"In what circumstances."

Johnson drew himself up.

"We can only act on information received. Mrs. Lapthorn is convinced that your wife, whom she was meeting regularly up to the end of last November, was living in London with a man called Peter. She does not know his other name. Until you show me that this story is nonsense I have to assume that it may be correct. Give me the address in Scotland and I will check it and inform Mrs. Lapthorn of her error. It is as much in your own interest as your wife's. Won't you do that?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Alastair Hilton turned his head away until the inspector could see only the hard line of his cheek.

"Because I don't know her address. She never went to Scotland. She left a message, a short note to me, saying she was going to this old school friend of hers. To cover her tracks for a few days, I suppose. Then she wrote to say it was not true. She had left me for good—with a man called Peter."

"Peter. Peter what?"

"I don't know."

"You don't—"

"It is probably too late to convince you, Inspector. But that is the truth. I do not know this fellow. I doubt if I have ever seen him. Now do you understand my position?"

There was a long silence. Chief-Inspector Johnson felt a strong sense of outrage. It was bad enough to have the chap lying and evading questions and keeping his shifty eyes turned always towards the garden. But to suggest—

"Do you mean to say you don't know who the man is?"

"I mean more than that. I don't even know if he truly exists."

"Are you suggesting your wife is not normal?"

A little smile appeared on Mr. Hilton's thin lips.

"Now I wonder what exactly you mean by that, Inspector? No, don't try to tell me. I can guess. You simply mean, Is my wife

going off her head, up the pole, or round the bend, as they say now-a-days? I don't go so far as that. But Felicity is incurably romantic: she always was. She still has quite childish illusions about people, particularly men. She is easily flattered. If anyone showed her a reasonable amount of admiration she would conclude that it meant the arrival of a grand passion."

"Which of your friends or acquaintances do you suspect of showing her this admiration?"

"None."

The inspector pursed up his mouth again.

"Come now, sir. You admit she has gone off with another man. It wouldn't be natural in any husband not to find out who the blighter is."

"Then I'm afraid I have behaved very unnaturally."

"Haven't you moved a finger, sir?"

"Oh, yes. Several. I wrote her a letter. She asked me to. And I addressed it, as Janet Lapthorn addressed hers, to Charing Cross Post Office. Perhaps I ought to explain that in her letter to me, saying she had gone away with—this Peter—she asked me to let her divorce me. My letter was in answer to that."

"What did you say, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I don't mind at all. I said nothing would persuade me, either to supply her with evidence for a divorce, or to divorce her. I advised her to come home, and reminded her that I was a very patient man. I also reminded her that she had been obliged to come home before, and suggested she might as well not put it off for so long this time."

Chief-Inspector Johnson whistled softly.

"So it's not the first time."

"Not by any manner of means. It is the third."

"I see. On the other two occasions was the man unknown to you?"

"No. The first was very short and badly bungled. A long week end, and I happened to run into the chap's wife in the market town where we lived at the time. She and her husband had a house in the country outside it. She was supposed to be in Devon with him and my wife. We sent telegrams—brief and to the point—and they came home the same day. I moved to London at the end of the month. The other affair was four years ago in Ealing, where we had a flat. She was away three months.

She came back when I discovered that the chap had a wife in America. He was a business friend, an Englishman who travelled the U.S.A. He settled over there afterwards. As far as I know."

"You have considered, I suppose, whether either of these men could have turned up again?"

"Neither of them was called Peter."

"That need not matter. Your wife would want to conceal his identity."

Alastair Hilton did not make any answer to that. Johnson, a dogged man, ploughed on.

"Then you assure me, do you, that you have no exact knowledge of your wife's present whereabouts?"

"None whatever."

"And you don't know where she has been at all since she left home in July?"

"August. August 10th."

"Thank you. I am glad you decided to tell me that."

Mr. Hilton made an angry movement with his right hand; it went strangely with his calm pale face, but he said nothing.

"You don't know at all where she has been since August 10th?"

"Not precisely. Somewhere in London, of course."

"Because you know that Mrs. Lapthorn was meeting her there? Fair enough. But since last November Mrs. Lapthorn has neither seen her nor heard from her. In other words she has disappeared."

"Because she doesn't choose to have any more to do with Janet Lapthorn?"

"I hope that is the reason."

"What other reason could there be?"

Johnson did not answer this directly.

"Tell me, Mr. Hilton. How often did your wife write to you after she left you?"

"Twice. The letter she left here for me, and which I answered as I have told you, and the other letter, telling me the truth and asking for a divorce."

"You have heard nothing of her since?"

"I did not say that. You asked me if she had written. She did not. But a solicitor, acting on her behalf, wrote to ask me if I would reconsider my attitude and allow her suit to be

undefended, or alternatively take divorce proceedings against her? I answered through my solicitor that I would not do either."

"How often did this occur?"

"Three times."

"When was the last time?"

Mr. Hilton turned to look at the inspector. He seemed to be genuinely concerned at last.

"It was some time in November," he said, with surprise beginning to spread over his face. "Yes, about the beginning of the second week."

"Ah."

The two men continued to stare at each other, and Johnson saw a shadow, that might have been fear, pass quickly over the other's face, leaving it as composed as before. The inspector took a step forward.

"Have you now, or have you ever had, since November, any doubt about your wife's personal safety? Any fear that something might have happened to her? An illness? Even a street accident?"

"No."

"Not even when Mrs. Lapthorn started writing to you to say she could not get in touch with her friend?"

"Not even then."

"I find that rather strange, sir."

"Do you? I don't, and I will tell you why. Since my wife left me I have made her an allowance, sufficient to keep her in moderate comfort at a small hotel or in rooms. At her own request the money was paid direct by my bank into hers. She has for a long time had a separate account at a central London branch of my bank. As I say, the money has been paid in, and the account is still open.

Withdrawals have been made at regular intervals. Naturally I have known about that from time to time."

"You mean she is still drawing on her account, provided by you?"

"Exactly. So you see, Inspector, I can't get up much enthusiasm for Janet Lapthorn's melodramatic suspicions."

"Who told you she had suspicions? I did not."

"She did, herself."

"I see."

"I wonder if you do, Inspector. I wonder if you ever see anything at all clearly. I wonder very much what point there is in coming here to discuss my private affairs, and my wife's behaviour. It would be much better, surely, to give your energies to the detection of crime."

The inspector was not to be drawn.

"Well, I think that's all, sir," he said stolidly. "For the present, at any rate."

Looking back at the gate he saw that Mr. Hilton was watching his departure from the front door. He gave him a friendly salute and received a friendly smile in return. But he took the next train back to London with a feeling of deep frustration. The whole thing was too simple, too glib. And where was Mrs. Hilton, anyway? As the train passed Wimbledon he began to stare out the window. Bombed spaces, new blocks of flats, mean remnants of slum, grimy curtains, smeared panes. Behind one of these Terry Byrnes had seen murder done. Or had he imagined it? No, Terry knew what he had seen. An otherwise unreported murder. And a reported disappearance. Both in late November, four months ago. Not enough to connect them. But it wouldn't be a bad thing to find Mrs. Hilton. Not at all a bad thing.

Boxwood station is no different from a dozen others on the suburban lines of the Southern Region. A low red-brick central block, on each platform, with entrance hall, waiting-room, stationmaster's office, and parcels room. A sloping roof protecting passengers in front of these buildings. Gardens at the two ends, nicely tended. A single handcart, a few bags of mail, a crate of carrier pigeons to be released at leisure by the station porter, a great many bicycles on a row of bicycle stands. And the station bookstall. This lay on the up side to the right of the main entrance and exit; it was similar in design to other bookstalls, with glass-fronted shelves at the end, carrying a few good editions, and a profusion of magazines and crime paperbacks on the wide sloping counter. Below the counter the usual poster advertisements of papers sold there: *Picture Post, Evening*

Standard, The Times, Economist, Reynolds's News—a mere selection of the abundance above on the counter. Behind the glass shelves a little office desk, partly concealed, to which the newsagent retreated when business was slack.

On Monday morning Alastair Hilton turned from the bookstall at Boxwood station to find Basil Sims just behind him. The latter reached past him to take a *Telegraph* from the outstretched hand of the newsagent, who smiled at his regular customer. Then he turned to join his friend. They stood, leaning against the bookstall, waiting for their train to come in.

"Still paying for the same rag twice over?" said Hilton, affably.

"Still preserving peace in the home by leaving Margaret her copy, and giving myself something to read in the train. And anyway I don't go in for fancy things like that," he added, pointing to the learned periodical under Hilton's arm.

"Archaeology is not fancy," the latter protested. "Just extremely interesting. You fish. I dig."

"Done any lately?" asked his friend.

"No. But I hope to soon. Perhaps the week end after next."

"Same old place?"

"Roughly—yes. I still have permission. One has to be careful, you know."

"By the way," Basil Sims continued. "Margaret was asking after you only this morning at breakfast. Several people are, you know. We never seem to see you these days. It's about time Felicity got that friend of hers into a nursing home and came back to look after you. And rout you out a bit. You'll be turning into a recluse before you know where you are. Locked doors—milk curdling on the doorstep. Bearded face at an upper window."

The train, gliding swiftly into the station, put an end to this nonsense. But as they climbed into the same carriage and sat down opposite each other, Basil leaned forward, tapping Alastair on the knee and saying in a theatrically deep voice, "You haven't by any chance made away with her, have you?"

Mr. Hilton stared at him, then let his face relax into a gentle smile.

"That," he said, "would not be at all an easy thing to do."

The banging of doors and blowing of whistles drowned Basil

Sims’s reply.

4 The Archaeologist's Week End

I

The White Hart, at Duckington, near the edge of the South Downs, was one of those rarities in England, a small country pub that took up to half a dozen resident guests at any one time. Not only put them up, but was commended for doing so, as the R.A.C. and A.A. signs above its doors testified. And yet the house did nothing to advertise itself. It was not even conspicuous from the main road, since it stood about a hundred yards back from it at the end of a cul-de-sac, with barely enough room for the sort of parking space needed in modern times. Perhaps the quiet and the retirement were its chief attractions. The dust and noise of Duckington's main square, picturesque though it was, tended to keep visitors from the Royal Arms Hotel there. Besides, the hotel was a mid-Victorian horror, having affinities with St. Pancras and other northern stations, such as Darlington. The White Hart had no architectural pretensions whatever. Just a pleasant Regency facade, suggesting that it had been built to attract the new fashion travelling towards Brighton, when that fishing village came into royal favour. In any case, it had kept its popularity with the discriminating.

April had begun with grey skies and many inches of rain. The paths in the prim garden of the White Hart were washed smooth and slippery by the rain, chalk showing at their edges, for the soil was a very few inches deep where the long fingers of the Downs reached inland into the weald, as at Duckington.

But on the Saturday morning of Alastair Hilton's visit the sun rose splendid in a clear sky, lifting late daffodils and tulips downtrodden by the rain, and filling the upper windows of the little hotel with the scent of wallflowers.

Mr. Hilton had arrived after dark the night before. He had driven himself from Boxwood in the old but well cared-for Standard he had owned since 1939. That had meant going home from London at the end of the business day, packing up a suitcase, eating a few sandwiches left by his housekeeper, who

could never be persuaded to stay alone in the house when he spent a week end away, and taking the car down to Billings, the chief Boxwood garage, for petrol and oil and air. A slow cross-suburban journey brought him to Leatherhead; from there he gained the main road to Horsham, and so on to this secluded corner between Brighton and Worthing.

He was welcomed as an old friend. Mrs. Norbury, alone now, since her husband Pat died three years after the war, liked her old customers best. She could rely on them to stay at the White Hart at least six week ends during the season: she knew that they paid their bills, and tipped her staff, and did not steal the fittings, or try to cash cheques in the bar. Besides, her oldest customers, amongst whom was Alastair Hilton, had known Pat, and she could allow herself the tearful luxury of recalling the first years of her ownership, when the White Hart was a new, uncertain venture, mopping up Pat's gratuity and all her own savings like blotting paper, and giving them nightmares after they had been over the accounts when the guests were all in bed. She could remind him of Pat's good luck in the war, missing everything, wounds, tropical diseases, imprisonment, death; and of his bad luck in the peace, dying in twenty-four hours of polio, just as the doctors were rushing him off to an iron lung.

It was on account of Mr. Hilton's special standing that she gave him the small table near the window in the dining room; the table where the early-morning sun, falling on one of her little circular posy bowls, turned the petals of late primroses into transparent webs of gold tissue, and forget-me-nots into clear specks of sky, and wallflower heads into a blaze of orange-red velvet.

He did not come down very early, but Mrs. Norbury was not surprised. She knew he worked hard. His business was not large, and was very personal. She had always considered him unwise not to sell out to a bigger firm and take an executive post at a fixed income with superannuation and pension. But he was too independent, of course. And in a way, too unbusiness-like. Unworldly, might be a fairer word. He appeared to be comfortably off, with no ambition of any kind.

So when she looked into the dining room and found his table still neat and bare in the sunshine, while the rest were littered

with crumbs and used cups standing out of place, and bits of envelopes on the sticky plates, Mrs. Norbury smiled indulgently at Norah, the waitress on duty.

"No sign of Mr. Hilton yet?" she asked.

"Not a sign."

"He had his tea at seven?"

"Daisy took it up. She said he was awake, reading a book, when he called her in."

"He may have dropped off again. It's his Easter holiday, after all. He always comes the fortnight early to miss the crowds. Sensible man, and lucky for us," she added, smiling again at Norah this time. She could depend on the girl's good nature to keep the guest's coffee and porridge hot, and persuade the kitchen to cook his rasher and egg the moment he appeared. She would not need to go to the kitchen herself until she had been upstairs to the linen cupboard.

On her way up she met Mr. Hilton coming down. He was wearing old grey flannel trousers and a tweed coat with leather elbows. He looked rather pale, she thought, and tired. Ready for his holiday.

"A week end isn't enough for you busy men," she said, after greeting him. "You look as if you could do with a fortnight."

"I could do with it," he answered with a short laugh. "But I couldn't afford it."

"Everyone says that," she answered. "Never mind. The weather's going to be kind to you today. You'll be up at the barrows, I suppose?"

"That's it. My old vice."

"If you want anything cleaned when you come in, ask Norah. She's very obliging. You've got your old table, Mr. Hilton. In the sun."

"You spoil me," he said, with a boyish look that touched her suddenly.

As she went on, mounting slowly, she heard him jump down the last two steps of the stairs, and smiled to herself. The man was lonely, she thought, as well as overworked. His wife never came with him on these digging holidays of his. That was rather a shame. Surely she could amuse herself watching him, even if she didn't take any interest in prehistoric crockery and old skeletons. Perhaps, after all, he was better off without her. He

enjoyed his digging in his own quiet way; and there was very little to show for it. Mrs. Hilton might easily get bored. The vicar wasn't likely to have given permission for fresh digging in those barrows if he thought Mr. Hilton would find anything of importance. Mrs. Norbury shook the unsatisfactory Mrs. Hilton from her thoughts as she went on down the corridor.

Alastair Hilton was away all day. All day the sun shone brightly and Mrs. Norbury and her staff worked like beavers to supply morning coffee, lunches, and teas, to week enders making the most of the fine weather. As well as all this the bars, public and saloon, were crammed during opening hours in the middle of the day, and promised to be equally full when dusk fell.

Coming down the long chalk path from the hills, Alastair stopped to admire Duckington church spire, thin and elegant above a sturdy tower, and shining red-gold in the sunset. He patted the heavy bag slung over one shoulder. A successful day; perhaps he would call on the vicar tomorrow to renew their slight acquaintance, and describe his wonderful finds. After all, it was good of him to allow an amateur a free hand, even if these particular barrows had officially been cleared some years ago. When he thought how lucky he had been, he nearly laughed aloud. But the sun was fading from the tower, and colour was draining from the trees and the grass. Below him the White Hart's windows shone invitingly. He pushed his bag further off his hip, and went on down the hill.

When he reached the inn, he thought at first that he would have a beer in the saloon bar before going upstairs to change. He was thirsty and he would have to wait half an hour at least for his dinner. But the crowd round the bar was three or four deep and he felt discouraged. So he made his way into the small resident's lounge and rang the bell.

For some time nothing happened. The staff was fully occupied. The other resident guests were out or in the bar; Hilton was alone in his importunity.

But Mrs. Norbury's rule was that service meant business, so she left off superintending the final stages of the dinner to go to the lounge herself. Mr. Hilton, of course, she said to herself, and looking more worn out than ever.

“Well, you do look as if you’d had a day of it,” she said. “Absolutely done up, aren’t you?”

“Not absolutely. Just pleasantly tired, really. I’ve had a wonderful day. But I’ve a colossal thirst and the house seems to be full to overflowing. I wondered if I might have a bitter in here.”

“Now you go up to your room and sit down quietly,” the landlady said, with motherly vigor. “Your feet must be tired, if nothing else, walking all day, when you’re not used to it. You go and change your shoes, and I’ll send Daisy up with a pint. Dinner will be served at a quarter to,” she reminded him, looking over his head at the lounge clock, which gave the time as twenty minutes past seven.

Mr. Hilton thanked her and retired to his room, where he spread his finds on a newspaper on the small table under his window and then, collecting clean clothes and a towel, went off to have a quick bath, which he hoped would check the stiffness already making itself felt in his shoulders and calves.

As he was returning along the corridor not more than fifteen minutes later, he saw the chambermaid, Daisy, with an empty tray in her hand, leaving his room. The bitter had taken some time to arrive, he thought, or else Daisy had been trying to find him. But when he entered the room, he saw at once what had happened.

Without arranging his finds in any particular order, he had, on laying them out on the newspaper, put the bones on one side and the pieces of iron and bits of pottery on the other. One almost complete jug, of the late Bronze Age, he had set by itself. This was the specimen that had made him so satisfied with his day’s toil. It fixed the latest date of the barrow, and fixed it, he thought, much later than the official date hitherto ascribed to it. But that, of course, was for the experts to decide. He looked forward to presenting them the jug. This was the first time he had ever been in a position to do such a thing. Stiffness was negligible beside the honour that awaited him. For this he had spent the best part of the afternoon picking loose chalk away with his fingers.

But now, as he looked across the room, anger flamed up within him. The jug was missing. The fragment, balanced before on its nearly complete base, was simply not there. But a frantic

search revealed it a few seconds later. It lay now, in half a dozen crumbling and insignificant pieces, at the bottom of the waste-paper basket.

He was white with rage as he finished dressing, brushed his hair, and finally drank the beer that had cost him so much. He would report Daisy's damned curiosity and clumsiness to Mrs. Norbury, but of course the little slut would deny touching the jug. Say it blew off when she opened the door, or the window curtain blew in and swept it off. Make a good excuse, and deny everything else. Nevertheless, Mrs. Norbury had better know she had a snooper on her staff. What else had she been fingering, besides?

He put down his tankard at this thought and stood staring at his other finds. Then swiftly wrapping them in newspaper he packed them, together with the ruined vase, in the bottom of his suitcase, pushed in the haversack on top, and locked up the case. That done, he took his empty tankard and went downstairs to the lounge.

Mrs. Norbury was outwardly shocked and solicitous, inwardly derisive. If men must play such idiotic games, digging up old rubbish that broke at a touch, why didn't they take more care of it? But she promised to speak to Daisy. Fingering the guests' belongings, however innocently, might lead to worse disasters.

Daisy, as Alastair Hilton expected, denied hotly that she had touched the vase. She hadn't touched anything; not likely. Catch her laying her hands on mouldy bones; bits of old bodies that had lain with the worms for hundreds of years. It was indecent; it was unsanitary. They gave her the horrors. On being pressed by Mrs. Norbury she said she had noticed some broken pieces of what looked like pottery on the floor near the table, and merely tidied them into the waste-paper basket. The wind must have blown the jug over, or else the curtain caught in it.

"There isn't a wind," said Mrs. Norbury. "There hasn't been a breath all day."

Daisy shrugged, not answering.

"Now just you be careful, my girl," went on Mrs. Norbury. "You can be as independent as you like, but I took you on when the Royal Arms fired you for your offhand ways. Admittedly I need you here, and you can get a job elsewhere any day you please. But not in Duckington, as you very well know. If you

want to go on working here and living at home you can watch your step. Otherwise—"

She left the threat unspoken; it was more effective that way. She knew Daisy's boy friend worked in the bar at the Royal Arms. Daisy hadn't got him up to the point of a proposal yet, and the last thing the girl wanted was an interruption of her courtship at this stage.

"Yes, Mrs. Norbury," she said in a subdued voice.

"Now go straight off, and apologize to Mr. Hilton."

"I couldn't!"

"You can say you're ever so sorry you knocked it off putting down the tray," Mrs. Norbury suggested readily.

"I never. I put the tray on a chair, as there wasn't no room on the table."

"And swept everything out of the way, without asking yourself if any of it mattered. I know. I've seen you do it. Now, I don't want to hear what you were thinking. I haven't the time or the patience, and I'm not interested. Go and tell Mr. Hilton what you like, as long as you apologize. And keep your hands off the visitors' things in future. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Norbury. I'm sorry."

"I should think so."

A sulky, awkward Daisy made a rough apology, full of self-pity, later in the evening. Hilton received it absent-mindedly, but quietly. She wondered if he quite took in what she was saying. But when she tried to repeat it, he gave her a look so cold and so inimical that her self-importance shrivelled away inside her, and she went off feeling she might, after all, have guilt on her soul.

It was a very different Daisy who, on the following afternoon, confided a revised version of her mischance to Joe, her boy friend at the Royal Arms.

"Must be something queer about him, bringing all that stuff into the house," she said disdainfully. "Old bits of crocks and things like old nails, all bent and rusty. Not to mention the bones."

"Bones?" said Joe, astonished.

"That's right. Like they have in museums."

Daisy had been taken to a Natural History Museum at an impressionable age, and had since then connected all skeletons with show cases.

"Human bones?"

"That's right. Disgusting, I call it. Digging the poor creatures up after all these hundreds of years—"

"Thousands, isn't it? Prehistoric, don't they call the barrows?"

"You're very up in it, aren't you? Anyone at the Arms been bringing in broken pots and bones?"

"Not exactly. But there was a chap in the bar Friday night wanted to know if we had any remains about here. I told him the vicar was the one to ask, but I thought they'd finished up on the down. He seemed real interested. I told him the vicar had wrote a little book on the subject."

"Did Mollie tell you that?"

"Well, yes. But I knew it apart from Mollie."

Joe's sister, who worked at the vicarage, had been very full of the parson's book when it was in preparation. Later, he had seen copies of it at the Post Office, and had bought one to read. The excavations had been cleared during the previous autumn, except for one barrow, where an experimental dig had shown merely that the place had been rifled before.

"You mean there wasn't anything there for him to find?"

"I dunno. You'd better ask Mollie, or I'll lend you the book."

Daisy walked on in silence, but she could not keep her mind free from thoughts of Mr. Hilton. Spiteful thoughts. Thoughts of revenge.

As Joe was serving in the bar at his own place that night, she was back early at the White Hart. She was not on duty, but she thought she could safely draw Mr. Hilton's curtains and turn back his bedspread. The other chambermaid lived out and was often late on the job.

But Daisy's services were not needed. Mr. Hilton's bed was already stripped, the room was neat and bare. The books and suitcase had gone, but in the waste-paper basket, lying where she had put them the night before, and mercifully neglected by her that morning, were two small fragments of the broken vase. Mr. Hilton had evidently removed the rest. These were stuck in the wickerwork sides of the basket, and must have escaped his notice.

She took them out and laid them on the table. And it was then, she told Joe later, with imperfect accuracy, for the main idea had come to her before, that the sinister notion took hold of her, creeping over her brain like an icy stream. If it was not these bits of jug he really valued—and if he had he wouldn't have left them behind—was the whole thing phony? Had he really been digging to find something buried years and years ago, or had he been digging to bury something he had to get rid of now? Running back to her room, she put on her coat again and went over to the Royal Arms.

"You know the old man doesn't like you coming here while I'm serving."

"Go on! Don't be so jittery. He can't eat you."

"I can lose the job. And have to leave Duckington."

"I won't be half a tick. Give me a small 'light.' Listen. I think the bones Mr. Hilton had, he brought with him."

"What's this? Twenty questions?"

"No. Do listen. I think he may have buried some and not found room for the rest. So he had to take them away again."

"Are you crazy? Why did he display them, then?"

"To take off suspicion. The old vase was there for that. He pretended to be ever so upset I broke it, but he left two bits of it in the waste-paper basket."

"Did he leave the nails? Or the other bits of crockery?"

"No. That might have been for effect, see."

"The imagination the kid has! What about this? If he brought the bones down to bury them—that's what you're hinting, isn't it?—a possible murder or something of the sort, disposing of the remains— Well, if he did, where were they on the night he arrived?"

"In his haversack. Slung on the hook behind the door."

"Did you see them?"

"No. But I felt them. It swung into the doorway when I was shutting the door and I pulled it back and felt these long things. I never gave it a thought at the time. But now it gives me the willies."

"Don't work yourself up! You better push along back. Mrs. Norbury wouldn't like you over here, and you know it. Let me have the bits of pot tomorrow. Mollie'll see what the vicar has to say."

II

Joe's sister, Mollie, had worked at the vicarage for nearly ten years, ever since, in fact, she had been rejected for the women's services in the war, on account of her spinal trouble, contracted in childhood. She lived with her parents, going to her work daily, and since Mr. Symonds, the parson, was gentle and kind, and Mrs. Symonds lively and chatty, she enjoyed her work and had no wish to change it. She had come to regard the vicar's family as an offshoot of her own. This feudal outlook sometimes annoyed Joe, who affected a revolutionary attitude among his friends, while remaining cautiously conservative in his ways. But he found Mollie's position very useful when he told her about Daisy's discoveries and suspicions.

Mollie confided first in Mrs. Symonds, who, while pleasantly shocked by the implications, and inclined to make light of them, was sufficiently interested to tell her husband at lunch.

"I must hear about this, Mollie," the vicar said, after the meal. "Come to my study when you have done the washing-up. And bring that specimen with you," he added.

Later, sitting at his broad desk, with the untidy piles of books and papers pushed on one side, Mr. Symonds turned the two small fragments over and over.

"These are very suggestive," he said. "The glaze and the hint of a pattern. Did Daisy get a good view of the crock before she broke it?"

"I don't know, sir. Would you like to see her about it?"

"Yes, I think I should. The story came to you from your brother, who got it from Daisy. Twice retelling usually alters a tale quite considerably."

The twinkle in the vicar's eye took all offence out of this remark. Mollie smiled happily.

"You're right, sir. And Daisy wouldn't be one to make light of a thing. She's a great hand at working herself up, if you know what I mean. Ten to one she only thought of the bones in the bag after she'd seen the ones out on the table."

"I agree."

"All the same, Mr. Hilton doesn't usually go back to London so

early. And Daisy says Mrs. Norbury was quite worried by his manner when he paid his bill, and he hardly spoke to Norah, which was most unlike him. Just left half a crown on his table in the dining room and not a word of thanks or goodbye or anything. Daisy heard Mrs. Norbury say to Norah she thought he was in for a nervous breakdown."

"That again may be Daisy's weakness for exaggeration," said Mr. Symonds.

He got up from the desk to knock his pipe out in the fireplace. "On second thoughts, I'll just wait a bit," he said quietly. "Leave these with me, Mollie. I'll do what I think best."

With this vague reassurance Mollie, and later her brother Joe, and Daisy herself, had to be content.

"It's rather odd," said Mr. Symonds that evening to his wife, "that Hilton did not come in to see me."

"Did you know he would be down this week end?" she answered.

"Not precisely. He wrote to ask permission to have another go at the site, which I gave him without calling a committee meeting, as we have closed our excavations there. This was several weeks ago. He said he would come down last week end or the one before, but he did not write again to say which."

"You'd think he would be all cock-a-hoop when he found a skeleton and some pottery in a place you had given up."

"Exactly. That's what I find so strange."

There was a pause, during which the vicar stared at the fire, and his wife went on with her knitting. Finally she broke the silence.

"Why did you leave that last barrow without opening it properly?"

"It was opened at one end. There were definite signs of its having been broken into, probably in the Middle Ages, we thought, from a few much later remains of tools we found there. Looking for gold, as usual. We left it and decided there was nothing of sufficient interest left on the site. It was about the time young Chambers discovered the Saxon farmhouse in the woods over at Flitton Marsh. The society had tumbled on something really thrilling, and Duckington Barrows have been

out of fashion ever since."

"But Mr. Hilton would not know that."

"He would not."

The second pause was longer than the first. This time the vicar ended it, speaking more to himself than to his wife.

"I shall send these bits of pottery to Jackson for an opinion. If they are genuine I will bring the report up at our next meeting. In the meantime I think we might go for a walk on the downs tomorrow and see how much damage Hilton has wrought on our site. Because we might have to go over it again."

"Not tomorrow," said Mrs. Symonds briskly. "I've got Miss Wills giving a special demonstration of glovemaking at the Institute. It was hard enough to get her at all, and tomorrow is her only free date for months. Everyone has been warned to turn up. So I can't possibly miss it just to go for a walk with you, can I?"

She looked at him lovingly, and the vicar reached for her hand across the gap between their two armchairs.

"I suppose not. Then I will put off my walk until later in the week. I should like to have you with me."

"I should like to come. But I won't have you digging by yourself and straining another muscle. Let's wait till Saturday and get Robin to come along and some of the others."

Thanks to the vicar's enthusiasm and Mrs. Symonds's voluble persistence the whole of Duckington heard of the project, and a considerable number of amateur archaeologists mustered at the week end outside the vicarage and tramped up the down to the formerly abandoned site. They were followed by a small crowd of interested onlookers, and by a reporter from the local Press who had listened to Joe's description at the Royal Arms of this sequel to his girl friend's misadventure with a piece of pottery.

The dig was handsomely rewarding. Mr. Hilton's neatly replaced turfs were once more taken off, and his excavation continued down the length of the barrow. Former diggings, including the original desecration, had destroyed the lay-out of the grave. But there were finds, in the shape of an ulna and radius from a left arm, and a breast bone with rib cartilages attached. Besides these human relics Mr. Symonds himself sifted out two more fragments of pottery.

If Hilton had found these, the vicar thought, perhaps his jug

would have been complete, and his loss in consequence the greater. But a few days later the vicar read a letter from Jackson, the expert to whom he had forwarded the later finds as well as Daisy's fragments. And he then decided that if Hilton had indeed found them, he would not have left any of the valuable material standing about on a small hotel bedroom table, under a window. For the jug was genuine and rather rare. A pity, Jackson wrote, that it had been broken in getting it out. This was an implied criticism of the local society that made Mr. Symonds smile ruefully. There was a similar specimen in the British Museum, the expert said, but he knew of none other found in this particular type of burial. He suggested that the bones found at the same time as the later fragments be sent to a friend of his called Wilson, who would be particularly interested to see them. He pointed out that the jug was of a period several thousand years later than finds dug out of the neighbouring barrows; this suggested a later use of the same site. It was strange that they had not been discovered before, as they must have been nearer the surface all the time.

Mr. Symonds, on receiving this letter, again used his own initiative as secretary of the local club. Without risking an argument in committee, that might thwart his purpose, he packed up the bones and sent them off.

Meanwhile the local Press, which was short of news for the next issue, gave a spirited account of the proceedings of the local Archaeological Society. This was copied briefly in some of the London dailies. And a man who read the newspapers daily, and had already once before been fatally misled by them, was duped again. He began to work out a move, designed for his completer protection, which was destined to lead him one step further along the road to disaster.

The second expert report arrived in a matter of days. There was a covering letter from Jackson.

When Mrs. Symonds saw the handwriting she asked at once for news of Bob Jackson, hoping, since he had given none in his first letter, that this one would prove more interesting. But the vicar, rather pale, waved a distracted hand.

"But Francis, read it out to me!" she said airily. "Heather

never writes, but I'm sure there's a message from her this time. If only about the Siamese. They were having no luck with the kittens if you remember. Skip the vase—no, it was the bones this time. I'm sure the other man's report is very long-winded and dull."

"You're wrong," said Mr. Symonds grimly, folding up the letter.

"As you rightly assume, Bob encloses this man Wilson's report. They are leaving it to me to take action."

"Take action," said Mrs. Symonds helplessly. "What about?"

"The bones we dug up," her husband told her, "were not prehistoric at all. Oh, I know they were dry and brown and all the rest of it. But there are tests for the age of bones, as you know. These are recent. Quite recent."

"You mean—Middle Ages or something—when the barrow was opened before?"

"I mean that they belong to modern times—to someone who has died within the last year."

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Symonds. And then she sat speechless, while her face became as pale and alarmed as that of her husband.

Mr. Symonds, anxious to avoid gossip, did not report his curious news to the local police at Duckington, but went with it to the Chief Constable, a Colonel Wetherall, whom he had known in the First World War, when he, as a young chaplain, had sat in a shell-hole in No Man's Land, holding on to a tall youth's brachial artery to stop hemorrhage from a severe wound in the forearm; and at the same time enlarging his profane vocabulary from the stream issuing from the young man's greyish lips. His action saved the life and the forearm of his companion, whose career after an interval continued uninterrupted. For some time they saw nothing of each other, but much later the colonel was appointed a chief constable, and Mr. Symonds, working on behalf of a particularly useless but attractive young offender in his parish, met him again, and recognized his former friend more by his language than by his now altered appearance. They visited from time to time; they called each other by their

Christian names, a thing they had never done when young; their wives were tolerant of each other.

So now Colonel Wetherall was ready to help his old friend.

"It'll have to go to the C.I.D.," he said. "Question is, where?"

"Hilton lives in Boxwood," said the vicar thoughtfully. "Surrey, isn't it, or Middlesex?"

"Surrey," said the colonel. "But I don't see what the hell—"

"He was digging in this spot where we found the bones," the vicar went on. "He is reported to have found bones himself and taken them away with him. I think in any case, his finds ought to be investigated."

"So do I."

"Not that I accuse him of anything," Mr. Symonds hastened to add. "Daisy was hysterical about it when she told her young man, Joe. These girls can think of nothing but the horrors they see at the cinema or in the daily gossip papers."

"I wouldn't be too sure," said the colonel. "You're charitable by profession, Francis. I'm just the opposite."

They beamed at each other foolishly.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Wetherall. "I'll send these bones to Scotland Yard, explaining we haven't the facilities to deal with 'em properly, which is true enough, though it would make Copeland damned angry. That suit you?"

"Very well," said Mr. Symonds.

He decided not to talk about the bones to anyone in Duckington and to put off the next meeting of the Archaeological Society until he had heard the results of the chief constable's action.

But this was not to happen for some time. The name of Hilton sent the bones immediately to Chief-Inspector Johnson, and from him they travelled to a Home Office pathologist, together with some smaller specimens found on the roofs of Waterbury Street, Lambeth. It was a long shot, but it worked. The report that came back presently sent Johnson hurrying to see Superintendent Mitchell.

"In his opinion the bones all come from the same woman. The wrist bones the workman, Gossage, found, fit the bones of the forearm found by Mr. Symonds in the barrow."

"And Mrs. Hilton is still missing?"

"Yes. She never went to Scotland. And there was a significant

incident over her money. I found withdrawals had been made by a messenger bringing in a note, ostensibly in her handwriting, and with her signature, to pay cash to bearer, together with apparently genuine cheques made out to herself. I arranged to have the messenger called in to the manager with a view to finding where he came from. But when the cashier went back to the counter after seeing if the office was ready, the man had gone. He has not been back since, and no further withdrawals have been made."

"Intimate knowledge of the lady's writing and chequebook and ability to trace or copy her signature. Would fit the husband or an unknown called Peter."

"Just so. Incidentally, the Hiltons' doctor in Boxwood sent a very guarded answer to our inquiries. It only confirms her disappearance. Apparently, though she did not go down to him after she left home, he used to send her prescriptions through the post. No, nothing dangerous, not even barbiturates. Just some patent pills he favoured for rheumatism. Well, these letters of his have now come back to him through the dead-letter post."

"Where had they been sent?"

"Not to Charing Cross in this case. An accommodation address in Horseferry Road. She called once a month for letters up to the middle of November. They waited till February, then began sending them back 'Address unknown.' The doctor has not told Hilton about this. Besides professional secrecy, he seems to have quarrelled with him, and Hilton changed to another man's list."

"What did they quarrel about?"

"Mrs. Hilton's treatment. She liked to try quack nostrums she saw advertised in newspapers and so on. Hilton thought it a waste of money. The doctor said he couldn't control her rheumatism much by the proper cures, so he thought she was justified in trying anything she found helpful."

"An open-minded view, but irritating to the husband."

"Especially as Mrs. Hilton did not give him this address, but only the Charing Cross Post Office."

"Has the shop identified her from photographs?"

"Not yet. I have not seen Hilton since the first time I called at the Willows, and it seemed a bit premature on that occasion to ask for photographs."

"Didn't we have some snapshots from Mrs. Lapthorn?"

“Quite useless. They were really snapshots of the Lapthorn woman herself. Mrs. Hilton hardly appeared in them.”

“We’d better have Felicity’s portrait. And get hold of those bones of Hilton’s and his pieces of pottery, before he destroys them.”

“I don’t think he will. He seems to be playing a very cautious game.”

“So did Crippen at the start. But they all get the wind up sooner or later.”

Chief-Inspector Johnson, however, was right. Mr. Hilton had not only kept the bones and the crocks, but had written to the British Museum to ask for an expert opinion on the latter. A representative had called and had been duly impressed. The find was genuine and most interesting. A pity it was so badly broken and that so much was missing.

Johnson asked to see all the finds, including the bones. But when Hilton laid them out before him in the sitting-room at the Willows, he scarcely glanced at them.

“Are these all the finds you made?” he asked.

“These are what I dug up at Duckington just over two weeks ago.”

Which may be so, the inspector thought, but is not so, necessarily.

“Have you any objection to my taking them away for examination?”

“None.”

Really, the man’s indifference and calm, slightly ironical voice, were very wearing, Johnson decided.

“I should also like to see and take away with me, if you have no objection, any recent photograph of Mrs. Hilton that you may have.”

Mr. Hilton’s eyes, now, were anything but indifferent.

“I can let you have one snapshot taken at Bognor nearly two years ago.”

“That would be better than nothing.”

There was silence as the inspector made up his parcel.

“Is it permitted to ask what is the meaning of all this?” said Hilton at last, pointing at the package under Johnson’s arm.

“You can ask, but I am not at liberty to give you any answer.”

“When shall I get my specimens back?”

“That I cannot tell either.”

Hilton shrugged and crossed to the door. But Johnson waited a moment longer.

“I have been here nearly an hour, Mr. Hilton,” he said. “And though you have asked me why I am taking these things away, you have not asked me if I have traced the whereabouts of your wife.”

“If you had been successful you would have told me so at once.”

“It would be the natural thing to expect.”

Johnson tried again.

“Have you traced her yourself?”

“I have made no effort to do so.”

“Why not?”

“That is my business, Inspector, not yours.” Perhaps seeing an unfavourable reaction in the inspector’s set face, he added, “I do not see any cause for alarm, myself.”

Chief-Inspector Johnson gripped his parcel more tightly. He hoped to give this dead-pan plenty of cause for alarm, and without too much delay, either.

But he was disappointed. Mr. Hilton’s pieces, once more placed before an expert, were passed with a true bill for bones and pottery alike. Late Bronze Age, later than specimens previously found at Duckington. The bones probably from an adolescent male; a suggestion of rickets in early childhood.

“We give them back to the twister, I suppose?” said Johnson disgustedly.

“Yes, but don’t be too downhearted. Even if Hilton got genuine bones from the barrow, he could easily have put some of his wife’s in before he filled it up with earth. In fact, that would be much more likely than that he should take down more than he could dispose of, and then bring them back again. That chambermaid, Daisy, wanted to get her own back on Hilton, and send nice cold shivers down her own spine and her boy friend’s. But it didn’t make any particular sense, did it?”

“No. I’ll have to go down to Duckington, though. Colonel Wetherall had better warn them. At any rate Hilton doesn’t know what the vicar found.”

But Hilton did. Because the Duckington Archaeological Society sent its fragments of the jug, as a present, to the British Museum, just about the time that Hilton, receiving his fragments back from Scotland Yard, offered them to the British Museum as a donation. In the ensuing archaeological excitement letters were exchanged between the vicar and Mr. Hilton. The latter quoted the report on his bones, and asked for Mr. Symonds's views on the Society's finds. Mr. Symonds, foolishly reassured, and repenting his former misgivings, explained the shock he had had.

"You may consider yourself fortunate," he wrote, "that you did not come across these mysterious recent remains. Perhaps I ought not to let this cat out of the bag, but as we have shared the honours in putting together an ancient jug of great historical and artistic value, I feel I can safely share this other knowledge which has nothing to do with you. Especially as Scotland Yard has the matter in hand."

"Just so," said Mr. Hilton, aloud, putting down the letter.

And then he got up from the breakfast table and walked across the room to where a large photograph of Felicity Hilton stared at him from big mournful eyes above an artificial smile.

"Safely," he whispered, and suddenly his mouth crumpled, and he clasped the photograph to him, tears bursting from his closed eyes.

5 Terry Byrnes Consults a Specialist

I

Though Terry Byrnes made up his mind to talk things over with his scientific friend Cyril Collings, he did not manage to do so at once. For one thing, Christmas was drawing near, and Terry had other things to think of. There were parties and dances to arrange; a gala night at the Square Dance Club he belonged to; also presents to buy for his family and the girl friend. None of this was, or could be, on a large scale, but it occupied his thoughts quite enough to stop him worrying about a mystery that grew more dim and less important with every day that passed. And when, Christmas over, the New Year took the stage in a cloak of thick snow, his physical discomfort from chilblains and chapped ears forced his attention upon his own grim path in life: the early rising, the daily journey, the monotonous grind at the office. He did not criticize its value, or question its inevitability; he merely grumbled. To himself, when surrounded by his elders; to his friends when they complained of their own misery.

But he had not altogether forgotten his dreadful experience. Again and again, as he travelled to Waterloo, he gazed out the window at the houses beside the line, trying to recognize the one that held the undisclosed secret of that foggy morning in November. He was never able to do so. He had seen so little of the building; his attention had been fixed from the start upon the brief, terrible scene at the window. And there were too many small houses overlooking the line. He knew only that he had been standing at a window of the train on the left-hand side facing the way they were going. So it must have been one of the houses on the north side of the railway.

It was not until April, when, the winter past, and some hours of daylight still left at the end of his working day, he began to meet his friends again, particularly those who lived further off

than the cluster of small houses and gardens up the hill from Toxley Green station. Among these was Cyril Collings. Going for a bicycle ride with Cyril one evening, and the talk turning to a series of violent crimes committed that week, Terry at last described his long-preserved secret.

"Do you mean to say they never found the body?" said Cyril, in so much astonishment that he almost rode down his friend.

"Look out! You darned nearly had me off. No, they didn't, nor the house either. I'm not sure they didn't think I was trying to pull a hoax of some sort."

"You can't blame them."

"One chap was all right. Chief-Inspector Johnson."

He brought out the name with an effortless ease he had practised while brushing his hair before the mirror. No expression on his face, his lips hardly moving. It had the desired result; Cyril was deeply impressed.

"A chief-inspector. That shows they took you seriously."

"He did. The others didn't. It stuck out a mile. They said they'd let me know the result. There never was a result. I sometimes wonder if I did really see anything."

"Have you ever thought you saw anything else that turned out not to be there?"

"No. Do you think it was that? Hallucinations or something?"

He looked so disturbed, so wild and lost, that Cyril first gave a loud and vulgar laugh, and then, putting a large hand on his friend's shoulder, rode on close beside him, to their mutual danger from passing cars.

"Tell you what," he said. "If Scotland Yard has given it up, what about trying to get my old man interested?"

"Do you mean your father?"

Cyril laughed so heartily this time that he nearly fell off himself.

"Of course not. I mean the head of our department. And that's not McAndrew, the senior lab assistant, though he does try to push us all around when the boss isn't there. No. I mean Dr. Wintringham. Dr. David Wintringham, director of clinical research at St. Edmund's Hospital. There are four assistants in his team, three of them doctors. But he doesn't only work at these special lines of research; cases, and what's behind them. At the hospital, I mean. He's a private detective as well. You must

have heard me mention him before. He's a brain. Genuine article."

Considering that Cyril Collings hardly ever spent an hour in his friend's company without describing Dr. Wintringham's exploits in one or other of his pursuits, Terry now smiled bitterly.

"I suppose you think I was building up to that?" he said.

"Weren't you?"

"I don't really know."

It must have been a sneaking thought of the great Wintringham at the back of his mind, Terry honestly admitted, that had led him at last to unburden himself to Cyril.

"Well, shall I?" the latter persisted.

"What'll he do?"

"He might turn it down. But he wouldn't mind my asking. Chaps can ask him anything—in reason. He'll give you a straight answer. But it had better be something sensible. One of the other lads, when he was new in our place, thought he'd get a rise out of Dr. Wintringham and asked him how many white hairs there were in a piebald guinea-pig's tail. Dr. Wintringham said he didn't know, but would like this chap to find out for himself. He got a cageful of experimental guinea-pigs sent down to his bench with a note to say when he had completed his count, Dr. Wintringham would like to see the figures, and would he make them out as a graph of white hairs per gram body-weight to age of specimen. That had Dennis, all right. He's a brain, the boss is."

"You'd better not tell him, then. He might say I'd got to make a graph of windows in the houses on the railway line, per broken panes to age of slum."

"That would be a good idea. Anyway, I'll tell him. There's no harm in it that I can see."

David Wintringham saw no harm in it, either, but he also saw very little good. His first reactions were similar to those of Chief-Inspector Johnson, and since the matter was put to him by a red-faced, rather incoherent lab boy from his own department, with none of Terry Byrnes's absolute conviction, he was also a little suspicious. But, since he was David Wintringham, his

unconquerable curiosity had not, even in middle age, begun to diminish, and he had, moreover, nothing in the detection line on hand at the moment.

"It sounds extremely vague," he said mildly, but without allowing any discouraging note in his voice. "Do you mean to say that Scotland Yard took it up, and then dropped it?"

"Terry says so. He hasn't liked to go since the last time they told him to wait. They were to notify him when they had anything. But they never did."

"Which does not necessarily mean they haven't got anything, but only that they have no need of your friend's assistance at this point."

"Yes, sir. I see, sir."

Cyril Collings began to edge towards the door. He had managed to catch the boss at the end of his day, and had missed his own train in consequence. It looked as if he might miss the next one. As his fingers reached for the handle of the door, David said casually, "Will you be seeing this friend of yours tonight?"

Cyril straightened up smartly.

"I could, sir. He lives about four miles from our place at Toxley Green. I could bike over."

"Then ask him to come along tomorrow evening about this time. He works at an insurance office, didn't you say?"

Cyril supposed he had said this, since the boss knew it, but he could not remember doing so. The familiar awe of Dr. Wintringham's brain rendered him speechless, but he managed to nod his agreement.

"Right. See you both tomorrow, then," said David pleasantly, and the boy slipped out of the room almost before he had finished speaking.

David's secretary found him still smiling gently to himself, when she took some papers into his room a few minutes later. But she was used to it, and did not wonder why. In her opinion Dr. Wintringham took an unpardonably frivolous view of both his research and his detection. SCIENCE and REAL LIFE were both sacred in her eyes.

"I have a new case," said David to Jill that evening.

“Interesting?”

Jill’s thoughts were at St. Edmund’s, David decided. As well they might be, since she knew he had come straight home from there.

“A mystery case. Or rather, the pale, faint ghost of one.”

“What are you talking about, darling?”

“Some new detection—perhaps.”

“Oh, dear!”

Jill, in the past, had been afraid of personal danger for her husband in these pursuits, sometimes with justification. But no real harm ever seemed to come to David, and now she only felt a mild annoyance at the thought of household upsets, late or missed meals, and comings and goings at all hours of the day and night.

“Why ghost?” she asked in a resigned voice.

David gave her a brief outline of Terry’s story as it had been relayed to him by Cyril Collings. She was frankly incredulous.

“It must have been a rather sordid, violent sort of quarrel,” she insisted. “Perhaps someone did bonk a woman on the head. She can’t have been killed. There must have been other people in the house.”

“Why?”

“Well, even if there weren’t, the body would be found.”

“Would it? Bodies have been hidden before now. In trunks, under floors, in hen-runs, in garages and sheds, in cellars, in cupboards. They have been put in acid, dropped in rivers, chopped up, boiled up—”

“Stop!” said Jill. “You needn’t go through all the loathsome cases of the century.”

“I’m only explaining why murder is not ruled out by the delay of—what is it—five months? in discovering a body.”

“But by this time someone who knew her must be asking what’s happened to her.”

“Exactly. I think I’ll ring up Steve and see if he knows anything about it.”

Superintendent Mitchell was at his own home. He listened to David in an ominous silence. The latter repeated his final question.

“Do you know anything about the case, Steve, or don’t you? And stop breathing like a grampus. I can hardly hear myself

speak."

In the explosion that followed David plucked the receiver from his ear, holding it some six inches away. Jill moved quietly nearer. The infuriated voice at the other end boomed on.

"Of all the infernal luck to have this wretched boy playing straight into your hands. Nosy young beggar. I'd like to—"

"Tut," said David, drawing the receiver nearer to exclude Jill. "My wife is listening to your bell-like tones, Steve, and probably the exchange as well. Can I come round and see you?"

"What, now?"

"Yes. It's barely nine o'clock and I want to know a little more before I see this boy myself. Or would you like me to start an investigation from scratch on the information Terry will give me? Would you prefer that?"

"Like hell I would."

"Be with you in twenty minutes."

"Thirty. I shall send out a general warning to pick you up for speeding. Fine, five pounds, or three months."

"I'll take the three months. Might get my textbook revised on time. My publisher is always grumbling."

In exactly twenty minutes David arrived at the superintendent's house in Edgware. Having taken an unusual route from his own house in Hampstead he had not been observed by any police officer on the way until he reached Edgware itself, when he was driving along the main road at less than thirty miles an hour.

Mitchell brought out glasses and two bottles of beer. Mrs. Mitchell, after five minutes' conversation with the distinguished visitor, removed herself and her mending to another room.

"Now," said the superintendent, sourly, "what do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"If we knew everything ourselves," said Mitchell, "there wouldn't be a case. There'd have been a conviction."

David sat up.

"Then I take it there was a murder and this boy was the only witness."

Mitchell shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'll put it briefly. This is what we've got. One. A witnessed scene of violence, possibly a killing. Two.

Fragments of human bones, found on a roof a few miles away on the other side of the railway from the described scene. Also human blood on the upper back windowsill of a house in the row where the bones were found. Fingerprints of the landlady and her daily and several others, all over the room and window. The place has been cleaned out and relet several times since the blood must have got there. Nothing identified from our records, but may be useful later on. Bones identified as human, female. Three. A mysterious type, using two names, both probably false, who brings a hired refrigerator to this house where we found the blood, and to that very room. The refrig has been traced, but not the man. No prints or clues of any value on the refrig."

Mitchell explained Chief-Inspector Johnson's theory of the part played by cats in the discovery of the bones. David listened with a closed face and eyes in which nothing showed except an alert interest.

"Four," continued Mitchell. "A woman reports a missing friend, which leads us to a man whose wife no longer lives at home."

"You're very cautious."

"Bob Johnson is very cautious. For a long time this chap denied his wife had left him. Now he swears she is living with someone called Peter."

"Just that? No surname?"

"No surname. He declares he does not know, and has never met, his wife's lover."

"That's quite possible."

"But fairly unlikely."

"It depends."

"He declares he has never wanted to know."

"That is also fairly unlikely."

"I thought so."

"Anyway, husband of missing lady no help. Does the lad, what's his name, Terry Byrnes, identify her photograph?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Dead end," said David.

"Not quite. In fact," said Mitchell, "we seem to have got quite a step further in the last few weeks. Fact number five is particularly interesting."

He went on to describe the Duckington discovery.

“The man, Hilton, was working at the spot, and the vicar’s party subsequently dug up recent human bones there. An expert on this kind of relic, called Wilson, sent them on to us on the vicar’s advice, after he’d proved they were recent, not prehistoric. We’ve had them compared by a pathologist with the small bones from the roof in Waterbury Street. He says he can’t be absolutely positive, because all the bones are the worse for wear, but he thinks they may belong to the same individual.”

“Blimey!” said David. “Now you have got something.”

“Johnson went down to Duckington, of course,” continued Mitchell. “He saw the vicar and the landlady of the pub where Hilton stayed, and the girl Daisy, and her boy friend, Joe, at the Royal Arms. And he got one more significant piece of news. There was a second bloke interested in ancient burials that week end. Asking the way to the barrows. Called at the Royal Arms for a drink and stayed chatting till Joe told him what he wanted to know.”

“Did Joe tell him where to dig?”

“More than that. He hold him to go to the vicar for permission. Explaining, as well, what Daisy had told him, that that was what this Mr. Hilton did.”

“Do we know if this man was anything to do with Hilton?”

“No.”

“Did he go to the vicar?”

“No.”

“Then what did he do?”

“He was seen riding a motor-bike up the footpath on to the downs. Duckington was rather scandalized. Two young people nearly had their feet run over. They said he had a haversack on his shoulder, and as the bike bounced, it rattled.”

“Oh, come,” said David. “After the event!”

“No one in Duckington knows about Wilson’s findings.”

“But they have all heard Daisy’s theories, which are much more exciting.”

“True.”

“And from what you say she will be doubly convinced she was right when she does hear the truth about the bones. Have you traced this other man?”

“No. He was wearing full motor-cycling kit when he called at the Royal Arms, including a leather balaclava, and goggles on

his forehead. He was clean-shaved, and of average height. That's all the barman, Joe, can say of him. No one else seems to have noticed him."

David thought for a few minutes.

"Don't you find it odd," he said at last, "that *the other man*, as we must call him, never seems to materialize, whereas Mr. Alastair Hilton is always readily available?"

"I know," said Mitchell. "Johnson feels the same. The other man, as you call him, may not exist. Or rather he may be Hilton, too."

"What about the bones Daisy saw in Hilton's possession? Have you got those?"

"Naturally we asked Hilton about them, and he had no objection to our examining them. He had already arranged to take them up to the British Museum."

"They were genuine, then?"

"Quite genuine. They tallied with his pieces of the jug Daisy broke, the rest of which the vicar's party found. The whole of the pottery is now at the Museum, being stuck together, I believe."

"Well," said David, "I suppose you've no objection to my having a look round. A little chat with Inspector Johnson, and perhaps a peek at the bones. I don't much like the idea of this cat's-meat man. Incidentally, I wonder what he did with the head? These tidy-minded murderers usually take it off to dispose of separately. Must know it's specially liable to be identified in these days of universal recorded dentistry. I should also like to see the inside of the house where the deed was done."

"If we knew those two answers we'd be well on the way to a solution," said Mitchell, sourly.

"No. You'd still have to find Peter."

"Who may not exist."

"I wonder. Perhaps I could get more out of Hilton than you people have done. No objection to my trying, I suppose. By the way, have you given him any reason to suspect that you think Mrs. Hilton is dead?"

"No. He won't talk to us, so we haven't talked to him."

"Mutual sulks. Not very paying, Steve. I'll see what I can do. What about those bones?"

Next day, after finishing his own work at St. Edmund's, and postponing his interview with Terry Byrnes for a couple of days, David went to Scotland Yard, where he found Chief-Inspector Johnson with Superintendent Mitchell, and on a table, laid out on a sheet of white paper, several human bones of varying size.

"Want to see our pathologist's report first?" asked Johnson, after they had been introduced. "Or the archaeologist's letter?"

"No, thanks. After, if I may."

The inspector nodded, with approval in his eyes. David lifted, examined, fiddled, put together, took apart.

"Not being Spilsbury of great and glorious memory, I can't tell you the colour of her eyes, or the shape of her mouth," he said. "But by a miracle you found a couple of bones of the left wrist on the roof in Lambeth, and the vicar dug up part of the corresponding forearm bones in Duckington. Blessed be the morbidly curious, for they shall occasionally uncover crime."

"Don't be profane," said Mitchell severely.

"These belonged to a woman of early middle age," said David. "Rather short than tall, but with long fingers. Her hands would probably be conspicuous, as they would appear longer than average, and since she was suffering from early rheumatoid arthritis, the joints would be noticeably enlarged."

Chief-Inspector Johnson nodded.

"The report makes all those points," he said.

"Has it anything I haven't said?"

"No. Except that it lists the bones exactly, with detailed descriptions."

David was again looking at the relics.

"I wonder what happened to the ring," he said.

"The ring?"

"The wedding ring. Perhaps it was removed by the murderer. Only he would have to cut it off. It wouldn't have gone over swollen joints, and I should think all the joints were swollen pretty equally. Or perhaps someone's pretty puss spat it out, or is harbouring it in an accommodating caecum. Or has passed it on a neighbouring roof or an adjacent backyard."

"People down that way who came across it wouldn't be likely to report it. Might try the pawnshops, if we knew it had a distinguishing mark."

"Or the vet, or the Blue Cross, if it's been that way lately,"

said David. He turned from the bones.

"I consider myself more or less briefed by Terry Byrnes," he said. "When I see Hilton, if he will agree to meet me, I shall put it to him that Terry may have seen his wife. I shall begin to describe the circumstances, and see what reaction I get. Any objection?"

After some hesitation both Mitchell and Johnson agreed to his proposal, and David left the Yard, determined to find Alastair Hilton at the earliest possible opportunity.

II

The sun was still above the horizon when David came out on to the Embankment. In a clear sky the seagulls wheeled and dived where an elderly woman threw bread to them from the parapet of the river. The tide was high, and the water, against the stone confining walls, rose and fell in violent waves churned up by the tugs moving their strings of barges on the turn of the flood.

David, fitting the key into his car door, saw all this, and saw too the streams of neat clerical workers making their way back to suburbia across Hungerford Bridge, or on buses, or by Underground. No time like the present, he thought, as he turned the car.

He drove off to the west, keeping to the Embankment road as far as Battersea Bridge, and crossing the river at Putney. In less than half an hour he had found the Willows, Grange Road, Boxwood, and was pleased to see a car standing in the little garage beside the house.

But his easy deduction was soon proved false, for the housekeeper who opened the door explained that Mr. Hilton was not home yet, and never took the car to London in the ordinary way.

"He usually gets the five forty-eight," she said. "Gets in six twenty-two. Then he walks up: matter of fifteen minutes. Unless he isn't feeling up to it and takes a taxi. But he generally walks."

"I see," said David. "Then he will be here at any minute now?"

"That's right." The housekeeper looked him up and down. "Was he expecting you—sir?" she added, with some reluctance.

"No. But I have come from London and I particularly want to speak to him. My name is Wintringham. Dr. Wintringham."

With a slight feeling of guilt David watched the sacred tide having its effect. Privilege of profession, he saw, would give him what he wanted. Wonderful how the public reverenced the scientist. Or was it the witch doctor?

"I expect you'd better come in and wait, Doctor. He won't be long now."

She showed him into the pleasant sitting-room, with its view of the garden, its flowers and its photographs. He found her lingering, anxious to continue the conversation.

"I hope you won't mind my asking, Doctor. But is it about Mrs. Hilton? We've been getting that worried."

"You and Mr. Hilton, do you mean?"

"*Him*!" Her scorn was absolute. "Not him! All he ever cared about was his old fossils and such-like. No. It's me and my sister, and some of Mrs. Hilton's friends here that we work for. I only come to live in since she went, and not if he's away. I wouldn't be alone in the house. He had some extra help for me at the start, but I found her messing about in Mrs. Hilton's drawers, so she went. But it's a long time now. And I've not had a word of Mrs. Hilton since that last time I saw her."

"When was that?"

The housekeeper looked disturbed.

"I don't know why I'm talking to you, a perfect stranger, like this, when I've never said a word to him, himself. But she told me it was as much as the place was worth to tell him I'd seen her."

"When was that?" repeated David, gently.

"November last. Right at the beginning of the month."

"November!" David stared at her. "Go on, Mrs.— Mrs.—?"

"Mason, sir. It was a Saturday, see, and I go twelve sharp as a rule, though he doesn't come in till about two. But this particular Saturday I stayed on to wash out a few things for him, socks and the like, and as I was here I thought I might as well have a bite before I went on home. So I was just going to put on my coat at half-past one when I heard someone moving about upstairs and I nearly dropped, because I thought it was cosh-boys, and me alone in the house. But I went into the hall, meaning to see if they'd left the door open and I could get out

quietly, and there she was at the head of the stairs, looking down at me. Well, I was so glad to see it was only her I said, 'Thank God!' out loud. And she came down quickly and said in a sort of a whisper: 'I've not come back, Mrs. Mason, not yet. Don't tell Mr. Hilton I've been. Whatever you do, promise you won't tell him, or anyone else. Promise!' So of course I had to say I promised. And then she said: 'But I am coming back. As soon as I can. It won't be long. Only I want it to be a surprise for Mr. Hilton.' She must have seen my face because she went on, 'I had to fetch something of mine I forgot to take before.' "

"Had she anything in her hand you recognized?"

"No. I expect it was some of her jewellery, and that. She had a good few things. I see them in one of her drawers after she'd gone in July."

"But you saw nothing in November?"

"Not till after she'd gone. Then they weren't where they had been. Not that I'm in the habit of looking in her drawers. But after the way that other girl behaved I liked to keep an eye on things."

"I understand."

"I was took right aback by her being there. It seemed so unnatural. I said, 'Surely you haven't come all the way from Scotland to get one or two things of yours? Couldn't Mr. Hilton or me have packed them up and sent them?' And she went very red, and said she couldn't explain but she had to come. And her friend was better, anyhow, and she would soon be home for good."

"That was in November," David repeated thoughtfully.

"About the first week. And now we're nearly May, and not a word about her coming. Sometimes I think I ought to tell Mr. Hilton and sometimes I think he'd be so angry. I didn't tell him before, I daren't do it. And then there was that man called to see him. Second time he'd been, I understand. I'm not nosy, I assure you, but I wasn't born yesterday. That man was from the police; I'd take my oath. So I did hope you'd got news of her, and come on her behalf or something. I hope you'll excuse me, sir, I'm sure. Mrs. Hilton was always very good to me."

"I'm very grateful," said David. "If I may, I will pass on your news to Mr. Hilton myself. When he understands what I have to tell him, I'm quite sure he won't be angry with you."

“There’s his key in the door, now,” said Mrs. Mason, in a flutter. “I’ll go and tell him you want to speak to him.”

Alastair Hilton opened his eyes at last, and a little colour came back into his grey-white face.

“You fainted,” said David, holding a glass to his lips. “Swallow this.”

Hilton obeyed, coughed, and slowly raised himself on his elbow. He was lying on the floor of his sitting room, covered with a rug. He coughed again, and as memory came flooding back, he struggled to sit up, and then rested, his face against his drawn-up knees, his arms round them.

“I should have been more careful,” said David, self-reproach in his voice.

“You weren’t to know,” the other replied. “My heart has been rather dicky for several years now. I was invalided out of the Army in the war, much to my annoyance.”

“Were you married then?”

“No.” Hilton raised his head to look at David, then dropped it again with a weary gesture. “No, not till afterwards. Perhaps I was too old, and too ill. Perhaps it wasn’t fair on her all along.”

David turned away. He had sprung his news and got an outsize reaction, and he wasn’t at all proud of it. On the contrary, he was ashamed of himself. He had been grossly brutal and not very clever. Still, the mischief was done, and at any rate Hilton was now inclined to talk.

Helping the sick man up and settling him again to rest on the settee, propped now against cushions, David found himself definitely ranged with Hilton against an unknown evil.

“I’m glad you’ve cleared the air,” said Hilton, looking up at his visitor and attempting a smile, “even if it was rather a drastic way of doing it. At least I know why the police have been here, and what they suspect me of.”

“I don’t think they have anything as definite as suspicions,” said David.

“Have you?”

“No.” He added, with some emphasis, “None, now.”

Hilton lay back, considering.

“I should have thought my faint would strike you as highly

suspicious."

"No. Because you timed it wrong. You listened to all the factual horrors quite unmoved. It was only when I described the scene in the house by the railway, and described the woman as Terry saw her, that you were overcome. I conclude that until that moment you thought none of it had anything to do with you."

Hilton nodded.

"I could see her in every word you used. I must talk to this boy. I must show him a good photograph. I don't mind telling you that snapshot I gave the chief-inspector was not even of my wife. You see, I thought his inquiries might be from the other side; I mean, this man my wife was mixed up with might himself have a wife trying to raise hell for them both. I wanted to avoid any publicity. The chief-inspector would have realized the snapshot was no good if he'd taken the trouble to compare it, with, say, the picture over there."

He pointed to the large photograph on the table near one of the windows.

"Is this a recent one?" asked David.

"A year ago."

"A sad, disturbing face," David went on, allowing his thoughts full expression. "The eyes of a little girl suddenly interrupted in a day-dream. The mouth of a disappointed, not very generous woman."

"You're wrong," said Hilton, in a low voice. "Too generous. She'd do anything any knave liked to blarney her into."

David came back to the settee and sat down near it.

"The essential first thing," he said, "is to find this man Peter. We must hope Terry will now be able to identify your wife. But we must trace the man. Have you honestly no idea who he is?"

"Absolutely honestly," said Hilton, and David believed that he spoke the truth.

"Very well. Now, though *you* don't know *him* from Adam, it is obvious that *he* knows something, a good deal, in fact, about *you*. So it seems to me there are three classes of person, any one of which he might belong to. First, some friend or acquaintance of both you and your wife, either here, or anywhere you have lived, or through your business. Second, a person on purely business terms with you, but whom you would both know,

though you yourself would think of him more by his walk in life than as an individual."

"You mean the milkman or the sweep?"

"Something like that. The tout, the gardener, the cashier at the bank, the hairdresser at his shop. You will have to think, not only among your friends, but also among the host of those who serve and provision you."

"And the third type?" asked Hilton.

"This would be the most difficult; perhaps hopeless. Someone totally unknown to you whom Mrs. Hilton met in London. I understand she went up once or twice a week to shop or see a play or a film?"

"She did. But her main reason for doing so, at least during the last two years, was quite a serious one. She was trying to find a cure for her rheumatoid arthritis."

"I see." David drew a long breath. "Then can you tell me where she went? I mean was there any particular shop or institution or individual she went to consult? I have heard about her falling out with your G.P. down here. Or rather your falling out with him on her account."

"Yes. She was right off real doctors. A specialist recommended by our local man ordered gold injections, which upset her badly. Then cortisone came along, and she was mad to have it, until she heard about the snags. But all the time she was collecting advertisements in the papers and trying everything she could lay her hands on."

"Vaguely? Like that? Just *anything*?"

"There was one place, I believe, somewhere near the British Museum, she favoured particularly. One of these herbal health shops. Quite harmless, I'm sure. She found it one day while I was in the Museum looking at some Roman glass. She never wanted anything out of the past. Only the present, and a sort of glorified technicolour future she kept trying to find. When I came out she was walking up and down the courtyard with a parcel under her arm, excited and—beautiful."

His voice dropped on the last word and he turned his head to look at the photograph across the room.

"So you think she went back to this shop from time to time?" David asked, presently.

"I know she did. Fairly often. And had tea somewhere around

that part, too. She used to tell me the waitresses were getting to know her and how they thought she worked at the B.M."

"Then it would be reasonable to imagine that she might have got to know someone who, perhaps, visited this tea shop as regularly as herself?"

"Yes, I think it would."

"The waitresses who knew her ought to be a definite help," said David. "In the meantime are you absolutely certain that none of your friends here comes under any sort of suspicion?"

"Quite certain."

"In that case," said David, "there isn't much point in talking to them. It would only make things rather awkward for you."

"It certainly would," said Alastair Hilton.

The shock he had undergone in hearing Terry's story and the discoveries of the police seemed to have broken down all his resistance. He was grateful for any forbearance, and said, in so many words, that he now feared the worst.

If that man is false, thought David, turning his car into the London road, he's the most superb actor in this country, bar none. But he did not really think Hilton was acting. The best photograph in the house was lying, wrapped up, on the seat beside him, together with a list of the names and addresses of Mrs. Hilton's chief friends and her few relations. Since none of the latter had shown even as much interest in her whereabouts as Janet Lapthorn, David wrote them off as sources of information. The friends he meant to tackle as opportunity offered. But he was determined to do this in such a way that his inquiries did not recoil on the head of the man whom he now thought of as the chief sufferer in this strangely elusive case.

Chief-Inspector Johnson, however, had none of David's scruples. Terry Byrnes was summoned, and shown a series of cabinet portraits. In these a number of glamorous, dark-haired, intense-looking heads reared themselves on necks encircled by pearls, while lightly draped shoulders faded into the bottom of the picture. Terry chose the right one, feeling confident for the first time since his original visit to the Yard. When he had gone Johnson picked up David's list of the missing woman's friends. The inspector had no scruples about anyone's feelings. He

wanted to make his case.

But progress was slow. Mrs. Hilton had been careful not to compromise herself with her Boxwood friends, who turned out to be little more than acquaintances, though they had followed the modern habit of calling by the Christian name anyone whom they met for a second time. Nor did the average female intelligence of the villa world of Boxwood reach a high standard. Chief-Inspector Johnson was met with stupid coldness, stupid anger, avid but stupid curiosity, senseless malice, silly though loyal affection for Felicity; after many hours listening to inconsequent ramblings and false conclusions he began to take an exceedingly dim view of the womanhood of the district. Until at last he called at the home of Mrs. Basil Sims.

Mrs. Sims told him quite frankly that she detested Felicity Hilton and for the best of reasons.

"My husband pets her," she said. "Oh, I don't mean literally. Basil is much too lazy ever to get mixed up in an affair. But he always talks to her as if she needed looking after, and she laps it up with those great cow eyes of hers, and you can almost hear her purr."

She laughed aloud as she contemplated the picture of the cow-puss purring its horns off, and even Chief-Inspector Johnson smiled. "So, even though I *know* Basil doesn't care twopence for anyone except me, I am *wildly* jealous. And I've been so thankful to know she was still away, and Basil hasn't mentioned her name for months except—"

She broke off suddenly, remembering something.

"Go on," said Johnson. "What did he say, and when?"

"I can't remember *when*, said Mrs. Sims. "But not very long ago; perhaps a month or six weeks. Basil told me he thought Alastair was going nuts as a result of living alone. I asked him what he meant. Alastair and he always go up on the business train together in the same carriage, and he'd been asking about Felicity as a matter of common politeness. 'You needn't make an excuse for your asking,' I said. 'We all know what a *fatherly* interest you take in Felicity.' Basil doesn't mind being teased about her a bit, which is always a good sign, don't you think, Inspector? So then I asked what happened, and he said Alastair merely repeated what he's said all along about her being with an ill friend. So then Basil said in a joking way, 'You haven't done

away with her, I suppose?' or something like that. And it was his answer that rather upset Basil, so that he wanted to tell me about it. He said he felt distinctly odd when Alastair smiled in a peculiar manner and said, perfectly seriously, 'That would not be at all an easy thing to do.' "

Mrs. Sims stopped abruptly, driven now by her imagination into a dark lane of horror.

"You don't think—" she said faintly. "I mean, if he's mad, he couldn't have—"

Chief-Inspector Johnson took his leave firmly, and without answering these half formulated questions. He was in a hurry to find Mr. Basil Sims. And to find him before he went home that day to hear what his wife had to tell him. Though she might telephone, of course. There was always that possibility.

Mrs. Sims had not telephoned to her husband's office. Johnson, after asking the receptionist if a message had been received from Mrs. Sims, was told, no, there had been no call from Boxwood.

"In that case," said the inspector, "I will deliver it in person."

Mr. Sims was affable, though clearly mystified. Any annoyance he may have felt on learning of Johnson's ruse to enter his office was admirably controlled. The inspector gave his usual guarded account of his search for Mrs. Hilton, and carefully led Basil to give his own views. To his surprise the latter said he was not a bit anxious about her. He did not describe the rather sinister conversation his wife said he had held with Hilton. Instead he explained his view that Felicity Hilton was the sort of woman who would always find someone to look after her. Alastair was so darned dull, he continued, a thoroughgoing good chap, but too dim for a woman like Felicity. And after all, she'd consoled herself before, so why not now?

"I take it you knew the lady pretty well?" said Johnson carefully. "More intimately than your wife, I mean to say?"

"Now, now," said Sims, "don't take me up wrong. I'm a good boy, I am."

"But Mrs. Hilton—er—confided in you?"

"Perhaps she did. Now and then. She's the sort of girl you can't help wanting to—well, protect—if you know what I mean?"

"But your protection did not go very far?"

“You should see my wife,” said Sims, very earnestly. “God help me if anything ever went too far.”

There was a short silence. Then the chief-inspector said, quite casually, “Has it ever occurred to you that Mr. Hilton, in a fit of —misplaced jealousy, shall we say—might have taken any drastic steps against Mrs. Hilton?”

“What d’ you mean? Divorce?”

“No. I meant more in the nature of physical violence.”

“Not on your life! He’s absolutely crazy about her.”

“That has been a motive in a great many—er—tragedies.”

“You aren’t seriously suggesting that he’s done away with her?”

“No. But I am seriously suggesting that she may have been done away with. For reasons of jealousy, or fear, or simply gain. By someone who knew her intimately. You have not, I take it, done away with her yourself?”

“That,” said Basil Sims, surprisingly, showing all his excellent teeth in a wide smile, “would not be at all an easy thing to do.”

III

“I need your co-operation,” David Wintringham told his wife.

“Oh, yes, darling. How?”

“This Hilton case. We’ve got to find the man Peter.”

“Can’t you advertise? In the agony column. ‘Peter can learn something to his advantage—’ ”

“It would hardly be to his advantage to find himself at Scotland Yard, held for questioning.”

“It wouldn’t matter if he was innocent. Steve Mitchell thinks he was just a stooge, if he exists at all. Steve thinks Mrs. Hilton was simply playing him off against her husband, so as to make a better bargain over her return home. She was an old hand at this temporary elopement racket, wasn’t she?”

“I think she had no idea how thoroughly viciously she was behaving.”

“Darling, don’t make excuses for her. I can’t bear it. I loathe the bind-weed type of woman. Tell me how I can help you.”

David explained that Hilton knew very little of his wife’s expeditions to London except that she left home early in the

morning, dressed in her best, and that she usually seemed to spend her time in or near the British Museum.

"Not really the sort of place one normally dresses up for," said Jill. "But perhaps she used to meet her Peter there."

"We don't know. What we do know is that she went to a certain health shop in the neighbourhood, where she bought small packets of dried herbs and other concoctions she believed were good for her rheumatism. I have also found out that she went in for crafts in a mild way, again with the idea of keeping her joints supple. Quite sound, and rather pathetic, when you look at the state of the finger-joints. The craft shop where she got her supplies is also near the B.M."

"Where do I come in?" repeated Jill, patiently.

"You go into these shops to browse around and perhaps buy one or two things. You have been recommended by your friend, Mrs. Hilton. If I begin asking for her they will suspect me, or my intentions, which comes to the same thing. There is no one so respectable as the mild eccentric who owns a health store."

"You'll have to tell me lots more about her or I shall simply make an ass of myself."

"I'll be at your elbow. If you break the ice, I'll come in appropriately."

"I don't expect they'll know who I mean from Adam."

But Jill was wrong. Mrs. Hilton was known at both shops by name, and in both cases the assistants were eager to know why she had not visited them for so many months. They hoped her arthritis was not crippling her.

"She has been away," said David, cutting into the conversation.

This remark brought no further response in either case. At the health shop, which they visited second, Jill said, following the prearranged plan, as she received her change, "There is a tea shop near here that Mrs. Hilton is rather attached to. She told me to be sure to go there. But I've stupidly forgotten to bring the slip of paper she wrote down its name on, and I didn't bother to learn it because I had it written down. You wouldn't know it, I suppose? There must be masses of tea shops about here and in New Oxford Street."

"It wasn't in New Oxford Street," said a second assistant, who was listening. "I remember her saying this place made better

scones than she got anywhere except when she made them at home. That was when she was using our herbal tea. A turning off Russell Street I think she said, and it had a funny name, like Tea Cosy, or something."

"I expect we'll find it," said Jill.

The Wintringhams had to turn many corners, however, before they came upon the place they sought, and then they were uncertain, for the name was Cosy Corner, and they had passed a rival on the other side of Bloomsbury Street called the Tea Caddy. Nevertheless they went in and sat down.

"This is where you come into your own," said David. "I leave it all to you."

"What am I supposed to do?" Jill asked. "It's no good leaving it all to me when I haven't a clue about any of it."

"Find out if this is the dive Mrs. Hilton raved over, and if the boy friend came here with her, and if so, what he was like."

Jill gulped, but a brisk young waitress arriving at that moment prevented her from expressing her feelings. And the girl was so agreeable, and so obliging, that she found it quite easy to invent a recommendation from Mrs. Hilton as her reason for being there. The girl knew Mrs. Hilton by name; everyone there knew her by name, she explained. She had been a very regular customer during the whole of the previous summer and autumn.

"But we haven't seen her since last Christmas," said the waitress bringing a second, quite unwanted, bowl of sugar to their table.

"She has been away," said Jill carelessly.

"Away from London, do you mean?" said the girl. "Or away from home? She never seems to stay put, does she? Always on the move."

Jill smiled, and David pressed her foot under the table, as a warning, or an encouragement; she wondered which.

"I mean to say," went on the waitress, encouraged by Jill's expression, "three flats in six months is going it a bit, I should say. I wonder she managed to find them."

"I know," said Jill. "Poor things, they didn't seem to have any luck with their housing."

The waitress, recalled to herself by a fierce glance from the pay-desk, hurried off to some patient newcomers, and David and Jill looked at each other.

“Without rousing her suspicions,” said David, “we’ve got to discover if she knows where those digs were.”

“Mrs. Hilton isn’t likely to have told her, or not the truth, anyway. Didn’t you say her husband knew she had a pet tea shop in these parts?”

“Yes. Actually, I don’t think he ever bothered to look for it. But I agree she wouldn’t be so careless, after all the trouble she went to in other ways, to cover her tracks.”

When the waitress came to their table again Jill said, “It’s funny you should mention three flats where Mrs. Hilton lived last year. Because I’ve been thinking back, and I can only remember two.”

She paused, then took the plunge. “Boxwood, at first.”

“That was when she first began coming here,” said the girl. “Right at the start she was different to most customers. There are some read a book all the time, never say a word, don’t even condescend to look up when they order; you mightn’t exist. Then there’s some talk about the weather or what’s in the paper. But she was really friendly, except when he was there, of course.”

“You mean Peter?” said David, coming into the conversation too suddenly.

“I mean her husband,” said the waitress coldly. She was startled, and felt she had said too much. She gathered up her tray and left them.

“That’s torn it,” said Jill. “You might have kept out. First you leave the spadework to me, then you jump in and ruin it, just when I’m getting somewhere. I don’t see how we can possibly say another word about Mrs. H.”

“I wonder if she meant Peter or Alastair,” said David, sighing deeply.

“Peter or—oh, I see. Yes. You’d better ask her yourself. I give up.”

But the waitress had given up, too. Her tables were full, and fresh people were coming in all the time, to stand helplessly looking for empty seats. She slapped their bill down on their table without a word as she passed them, and they felt that it was time to go.

“Cheer up,” said David, when they reached the street. “Given a tactful approach I think she’ll talk. She’ll have to talk. There

are two important things she can tell us."

"The man who sometimes came with her, and the second and third places they had so-called flats in."

"Quite. With that information we ought to find the elusive and many-sided Peter. Or, at least, Steve's posse ought to."

But, though Superintendent Mitchell was graciously pleased to accept their news, Chief-Inspector Johnson, in his subsequent inquiries, achieved only a moderate success at the Cosy Corner. Alarmed to think that anything could have happened to one of her pet customers, the waitress was quite willing to tell all she knew. But it did not amount to very much. Mrs. Hilton had certainly chatted more than most customers do, but all the inspector discovered was that she had lived at Boxwood, then at or near Golders Green, and finally somewhere in the neighbourhood of Battersea Park. The exact address was still unknown. And again, Mrs. Hilton sometimes had a man with her on her visits to the tea shop, a man whom the waitress imagined to be her husband, and who was addressed by Mrs. Hilton as Peter. But the description of this individual was anything but clear.

"Might be almost anyone," said David, when he had heard it, "not a giant or a dwarf or an inhabitant of other continents. Average height and build, neither young nor old, nor, it would seem, middle-aged. Difficult."

"Girls of twenty have a different idea of middle age to what we do," said Johnson.

"Too true. She meant he wasn't what she'd call a boy, but he had probably kept his figure, as they say. Let's look at the rest of it. Brown hair, doesn't remember noticing the eyes, clean-shaved, dark suit, and so on. Might be anyone, as I said before."

"It might be Hilton himself," said Chief-Inspector Johnson. "Incidentally, it fits Mrs. Hunt's description of Rust."

"Did Felicity ever call Hilton, Peter? That could be *most* confusing."

"We have only his word for it that she didn't."

"What about the housekeeper?"

"Nix. Can't remember her calling him anything but dear. He called her 'darling.' "

“Poor devil. Somehow I can’t help being on Alastair’s side in this, Johnson. And the Lapthorn woman? What does she say?”

“She swears Peter was real.”

“After all, there’s no reason why there shouldn’t be a Peter. In fact, we have more reason than not to believe that there was. Unless Mrs. Hilton was more peculiar than we have allowed for.”

“Yes, I expcet there really was a Peter. That’s the devil of it.”

“Have you ever asked yourself this? *Why doesn’t he come forward*? Suppose Alastair did murder his wife out of jealousy, because she had gone to live with this man. Then Peter would lose her. She would disappear, suddenly, hideously, without a word or a sign. She would be missed from wherever they were living. In one of these flats.”

“Is it possible that the affair had already come to an end? Mrs. Mason’s evidence suggests it. My theory is that she left this Peter, or he cleared out, and left her. Hilton discovered where she was, while she was still making up her mind to go home, and he murdered her, and began to dispose of her body. The money arrangements fit that theory. Hilton never stopped her allowance, and it was being drawn under her signature right up to February. I think he drew it himself. It was his own money, even if he forged her signature to get it back.”

“No,” said David. “No, you can’t get away with that. Not if Harold Rust was Hilton. Because Rust spent his nights in Waterbury Street, and Hilton at Boxwood.”

“How do we know that? Hilton had his car out in the evenings a great deal last November and early December.”

“Surely neighbours would have noticed if he’d been away night after night, coming in early in the morning?”

“Possibly. But they aren’t always observant. His immediate neighbours have no comments to offer either way, except that he went out a lot in the evenings after the days got shorter. That’s all they recollect. Then there’s another thing. Harold Rust, the cat’s-meat man, had no proper luggage.”

“How d’you mean?”

“One small suitcase, hardly more than a large attaché case, and one pair of pyjamas, one spare shirt, and two pairs of socks. No other clothes except what he stood up in. Mrs. Hunt used to wash out the pyjamas and shirts every week and iron and air

them the same day. Same with the socks, only oftener. Charging a good price for doing it, of course."

"No luggage," said David, thoughtfully. "That is quite a point." He was silent for a few seconds. Then he went on, in his old argumentative voice, "But you'll have to find Peter in the end, won't you? This mysterious Peter, who nobody knows."

Chief-Inspector Johnson leaned forward.

"I think Hilton knows him. I think Peter is just a fancy name she invented for her lover, to hide his real name. I think Hilton saw through that. He knows him, and he is building up a case against him. Either that, or he is Peter himself and the murderer."

"No. We decided that was impossible. But are you perfectly sure you shouldn't have your other theory the other way round? Peter building up a case against Hilton?"

"Yes. The man I mark as Peter suspects nothing, but he is worried about Felicity Hilton."

"Who is that?"

"Have you ever heard of a business friend of Hilton's called Basil Sims?"

A couple of days after this, David was considering making another visit to Boxwood, this time without warning Alastair Hilton of his intention. But he was forestalled by the man himself, who rang him up to ask him to go down at once.

"I can't explain on the phone," he said, "but it really is important, or I would not be bothering you like this."

David had left his car at home that day. He went down to Boxwood by train. When he got out of the carriage the station seemed to be deserted. He crossed to the up platform where the main entrance was. A porter was moving wooden crates at the far end near the signal box, but in the small booking office, which was also the way out, he found no one. As he hesitated, wondering whether to keep his ticket, drop it on the platform, or knock at the closed window of the ticket office, he caught the eye of a youth in the station bookstall. The youth grinned.

"Is there anyone to take this?" asked David, holding out his ticket.

The boy shook his head. David went up to the bookstall.

“I wanted to ask about a return train, too.”

“About what time, sir?”

David looked at his watch; it was now a little after half-past five.

“Half-past six or so,” he answered.

The boy named several trains. There seemed to be at least three in the hour, so it would not matter very much what time he got back to the station after seeing Mr. Hilton. As the boy was friendly and helpful, David asked him the quickest way to Grange Road. He knew how to reach it from the London Road, by car, he explained, but not from the station.

Again the bookstall youth came to his help with a few clear directions. As he was turning away the friendly voice said: “Grange Road, is it, sir? You wouldn’t be passing the Willows by any chance?”

“I am going to the Willows,” said David.

“What I mean to say, Mr. Hilton didn’t have his magazine this morning. We’re short-handed through illness. I was going to take it up myself later. But perhaps as you’re going—”

“Of course,” said David, taking the copy of *The Archaeologist* the boy handed to him across the shining ranks of women’s papers.

“We send it up as often as not,” went on the boy. “Because he don’t always go to business. He isn’t strong, is he? Or so they say. If he isn’t on the train in the morning, we send it up later, if we aren’t short-handed. Or sometimes Mr. Sims takes it.”

“Sims!” said David, then recollecting himself, added, as he thought, fatuously, “Good old Sims!”

“Do you know Mr. Sims too, sir? He doesn’t mind taking Mr. Hilton’s copy because he takes the same book himself now.”

“Does he indeed?” said David. “When did he start that?”

“February or March. I disremember. Somewhere about then.”

Before David had decided what to ask next the boy said confidentially, “Mrs. Sims is a smasher, isn’t she, sir? But not such a smasher as Mrs. Hilton.”

Seeing David’s stare of complete astonishment the boy reddened and mumbled, “At least, that’s what the boss says,” immediately afterwards disappearing into the little box at the side of the stall where office work was conducted.

David leaned across the papers.

“Hi!” he said. “Come out!”

The boy put his face round the corner of the box. It was expressionless and cold, very much on guard.

“I thought you were the boss,” David said.

There was no answer.

“How many of you work here?” said David. “Or do you only stand in when there is illness?”

“I always work here, but I only run the place when the boss is away.”

“So you have a free hand with the papers and the magazines when the boss is taking time off.”

“On holiday,” said the boy, defiant but sulky. “Or away ill.”

“When was the last time you were in charge, for any length of time?”

“End of last year, if you want to know. And not Christmas, neither. November. What is all this? What’s it got to do with you whether I’m in charge here or not? If you hadn’t said you were a friend of Mr. Hilton’s—”

“You like Mr. Hilton, don’t you?” said David, gently.

“I’m not speaking to you any more.”

“What about Mr. Sims? Do you like Mr. Sims?”

The boy gave him a look of hate and fury and disappeared once more into his box.

David walked through the deserted ticket office into the road beyond. A waitress and a newsagent’s boy. Both were so easily upset by questions about the Hiltons and their friends. There was too much emotion flying about in this case, he decided. Too much emotion, and far too few facts.

“Good of you to come down so promptly,” said Alastair Hilton opening the front door himself to his visitor. “Come in.”

As he followed Hilton into the sitting-room, David smiled over his shoulder at Mrs. Mason, who had appeared to answer the bell.

“Your housekeeper is doing overtime,” he said, accepting the chair Hilton offered.

“Not really. I think she’s waiting to have a word with you. She found me rather upset this morning.”

“Why?”

“I’ve had a burglary,” said Hilton. He sat down himself, facing David. His hands were shaking a little. “In the night,” he added.

“Didn’t you hear anything?” said David, slowly. He knew, for Hilton had told him, that the latter was sleeping badly. A man in that condition usually reacted to the slightest sound.

“No. I heard nothing. My doctor—” He hesitated, then continued. “My doctor is trying me on some new things for insomnia. They work—very well.”

“Especially if you take at least twice the dose he orders—yes?” said David, grimly. “You’ll have to be more careful, you know. Or more obedient, perhaps I should say.”

Hilton looked at him, smiling a little.

“You know too much. I’ve got to have sleep. I must have a few hours when I can forget—”

“That’s all right,” said David. “I’m not your doctor. Tell me about the burglary.”

“The house was broken into. My desk was turned upside down. Quite pointless, of course. I keep only household bills and receipts and letters from friends there. Nothing was taken as far as I know except some food out of the kitchen. And the burglar doesn’t seem to have gone into any of the upstairs rooms.”

“He must have expected more than he found. Or been disturbed at his work. Probably both. I still wonder you didn’t hear him. Or Mrs. Mason. Is she a heavy sleeper, too?”

“She doesn’t sleep here now. Said she preferred not.”

“Indeed.”

“What upset me,” said Hilton, growing a little pale as he went on, “was this. I had put out another copy of Felicity’s photograph in place of the one I gave you. I found the frame smashed and the photograph deliberately torn in pieces.”

“I see,” said David. He did not see at all, but he felt he had to say something to dispel the strange effect of this news.

“It was horrible,” said Hilton in a low voice. “Coming down this morning and pulling back the curtains and seeing the pile of glass and the broken frame on the floor. I thought the wind must have blown it down, until I saw the photograph. Torn across and across—deliberately. I’ll show you.”

He moved to a table where a silk scarf lay spread. Plucking this up by one corner he beckoned to David. Under the scarf, like a corpse under a sheet, lay the broken remains of Felicity’s

picture. David repressed a shiver.

"Are you sure nothing was taken from the house," he asked. "Except the food you mentioned?"

"I have not missed anything."

"Can we ask Mrs. Mason?"

Hilton seemed surprised.

"Yes. If you want to."

He went to the door and called to his housekeeper. She arrived very quickly.

"Dr. Wintringham wants to know if you have found traces of the burglar anywhere except here and the kitchen?"

"In the hall cupboard, sir."

"Oh. You didn't tell me."

"I haven't had the opportunity. I only looked there just now."

When you were, perhaps, trying to listen from the hall to what was going on in here, thought David. But he only said, "What is kept in the hall cupboard?"

"Nothing of any importance," said Hilton, irritably. "Old macs, hats, gum boots, croquet mallets, and balls. Things for the garden."

"Can we look?"

"I've not touched a thing," said Mrs. Mason. "I left it as I found it. I was waiting till the gentleman went."

The cupboard was in great confusion. Two mackintoshes lay on the floor of it, mixed up with several pairs of old shoes, rubber boots, gardening gloves, with the fingers in holes, an old straw hat, an old felt one.

"Anything missing?" said David.

"I really don't know."

"Your old green hat, the tweed one, isn't there," said Mrs. Mason.

But David was not listening to her. He had found something interesting. A few crumpled pages of the April number of *The Archaeologist*.

"Yours, I suppose?" he said, holding them out to Hilton.

"They'd be what was in the hat," said Mrs. Mason.

"What hat?" said David.

She repeated that the tweed hat was missing.

"My old deerstalker," said Hilton. "I sometimes stuff a bit of paper in the crown if the wind is particularly cold. But not the

April number. I know I didn't use that. I haven't worn the hat for ages."

"You had it when you went to Duckington last," said Mrs. Mason, stubbornly.

Alastair Hilton seemed to have some difficulty with his breathing.

"Come back and sit down," said David kindly. "I've just remembered something. The new number of *The Archaeologist*. The bookstall at the station asked me to deliver it to you. I was asking the way here."

He went back into the hall to get the journal, where it lay beside his hat.

"You seem to have enthused your friends," he said, returning to Hilton. "They told me a Mr. Sims takes it regularly now."

"Basil?" said Hilton, incredulously. "Basil always makes fun of —" He stopped, peering at David as if he didn't see him quite clearly.

"You don't think it was Basil who—"

"Who came here last night?" said David, softly. "Or were you going to ask another question?"

6 Terry Byrnes Speaks the Truth

For seven months Terry Byrnes had gone about with a load on his conscience. The cold, indigestible lump of his lie to Scotland Yard, and before that to his employer, had by this time so settled into his system that it did not impede its normal workings. Nevertheless it remained as an uneasiness, a perpetual vague discomfort. Especially was it a reproach in his relation to David Wintringham.

But for seven months Terry could not bring himself to confess his fault. It was not that, at this stage, he feared any reprisals from the office, or, which had prevented an earlier admission, any loss of faith in his story among the police. From Dr. Wintringham he learned that the Mrs. Hilton, whose photograph he was prepared to swear to, had indeed disappeared, and that there was a good deal of evidence to support the theory that she had been murdered. It was simply a question, now, of personal pride. He had gone up to dizzy heights in Cyril's estimation, and in that of his other friends who had been let into the secret. He could not bear to think of the loss of face he would suffer if he decided to put matters right at this late hour. He tried to banish the whole thing from his mind. But it would not be banished completely. And as the year advanced towards summer and the patient work at Scotland Yard continued, his guilt began to gnaw and nag at him like a relapsed gastric ulcer. He could hold out no longer. In the greatest secrecy he took his story to David Wintringham.

When he had finished telling it he wondered why he had held back for so long. Privately thinking the same, David allowed none of his annoyance with the young idiot to show on his face.

"What you are really telling me is that you must have been on a different train from the one Scotland Yard checked up with the Southern Region?"

"Yes, sir."

"About twenty minutes earlier, should you say?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice the time till I was back in Waterloo, after walking up to the bridge. It felt like years."

“We’ll call it twenty minutes at the outside, in the frame of mind you were obviously in at the time. We must find out where your train really did have its stops, if that is possible so long after the event.”

“There are only three places it could have been,” said Terry eagerly. He longed to make amends, and had, for the last week, watched carefully from his carriage window every morning. “It could be near Nine Elms, or near Vauxhall, or it could be before either of those, on the down side of Queen’s Road.”

“Queen’s Road, Battersea.”

“Of course.”

David stared at the boy. Lodgings in Golders Green. Lodgings near Battersea Park. A house on the railway near Queen’s Road.

“I shall have to tell Inspector Johnson,” he said. “I expect he’ll want to see you himself.”

“Must you tell him right away?” said Terry, desperately. “I thought if you found the house yourself you could explain afterwards—”

“And your lapse would drop quietly out of sight in the general excitement,” said David, smiling. “As a matter of fact, we have been interested in Battersea for some time now, for two reasons, which I can’t tell you about at present. I think perhaps I will just have a look round on my own. I’ll let you know if I get anywhere.”

It was the handcart, tipped up against the wall under the roofed passage, that caught David’s attention.

For two evenings he had driven his car in and around the borough of Battersea, following the main railway as far as possible. He had dived into side streets, and got himself involved with street markets and old bombed spaces and narrow cul-de-sacs. Gradually he had narrowed down the possible blocks of houses, supposing Terry’s new ideas were the right ones. On the third night he left the car at the side of the nearest main road, where such vehicles as his were not too conspicuous, and walked slowly past the dwellings he had selected.

It would have been better, he felt, as he left the first row of these, to tell Johnson and have the professional routine turned on to this job. The Southern Region highups might have been

able to pin-point the position from their knowledge of where the right train must have stopped. But he doubted very much if records were kept of the details of fog dislocation. In the earlier inquiry the drivers and signalmen would still remember what had happened that morning. But now, seven months later, their word, even if they gave it, would be open to doubt, at any rate in a court of law. All the same, David felt, Scotland Yard would consult the railway people, and they might very well suggest the most probable place for the train to slow up if the signals went against it on the outward side of Queen's Road, Battersea. And in any case the police would know straight off which houses answered Terry's description. And the borough authorities could probably help with details of the type of property, whether privately owned or belonging to the Council; whether in good repair or condemned. The latter would seem the more likely, from Terry's description.

But it was the handcart, together with his free imagination, that gave David the answer, by-passing the surer workings of the machine.

It held his attention precisely because it was a handcart. His mind was full of the known detail of Harold Rust's brief appearance. Rust, rather than Hilton, because to David, they were still apart, irreconcilably different. Rust appeared to have traded human flesh to cat owners, though not in the neighbourhood of Waterbury Street. He had on the other hand been generous to the roof-walkers at his lodging. The thought of Rust was accompanied inevitably by the thought of Rust's cart and its loathsome burden. And here was a handcart stowed under a covered passage between two houses.

David pushed open a rickety little gate in the railings that fenced the areas of the houses, and went up to the cart. It was old and dirty; it had the usual longish handles and a couple of short legs in front to support it when it was in a horizontal position. Its wheels had lost several spokes but their iron bands were sound. Having examined it, David stepped out into the road again.

It was apparent at once that neither of the two houses was occupied in the upper storeys. There were gaps in the windows, and cracks in the walls, and chimney pots were missing. It was equally obvious that the basement and lower floor of the right-

hand one, being boarded up, were also empty, but that the left hand one had a tenant. A dirty red curtain hung before the basement window, and two milk bottles, one full, one empty, stood at the top of the area steps.

David stood against the area railings, elaborately lighting a cigarette. He did not know how many pairs of eyes were upon him from behind neighbouring curtains. Radios were playing an ill concerted chorus from most of the houses in the street, but though it was dusk very few lights were on. Deciding that an official bearing would become him best in that situation, he took out a notebook and began gravely jotting down in it, lifting his eyes to the roofs, touching the front doors, and making a complete pantomime of one interested in the architecture of these ruins. When he had thus examined the outside of the houses, he stepped into the passage, passed behind the handcart and, pushing open an unlocked wooden door, found himself in a small paved back yard.

It was common to the two houses, and at its further end rose the towering wall of the railway embankment. Though from the road he had seen the railway behind the buildings, David was startled to see it now so near. And also to see a railway workman, a ganger or linesman, leaning on the parapet, looking down at him.

The man made no sign of greeting: he simply stared. So David decided that he must go on with his pantomime as before. The back door of the house was stiff, but had shrunk in the dry summer weather. He could see that it was not locked. He gave the handle a violent pull, the door came open, and he passed boldly inside.

Two things were at once apparent. The house had not been used for many weeks; and it had been visited very recently.

There was dust everywhere; the thick, black, gritty, greasy dust of London. Inside the little back kitchen to which the door gave access, the dust coated the bare boards of the floor and the ancient gas stove standing in one corner. It lay in streaks in the cracked sink under the window. But the sink was wet: drops clung to its outer sides. And in the dust of the floor footsteps marked a course from the outer to an inner door, and from that

again to the window. Leaving his examination of the sink for the present, David trod beside the tracks without damaging them, and went out of the door into a narrow hall.

The boarded-up front door was now before him; he saw it from the inner side, half broken, half burned, a twisted door handle still hanging from it. The footsteps went up the stairs and David followed.

He was not surprised to find himself in a room overlooking the railway. He went to the window, but he did not try to open it. Perhaps it was stiff, perhaps not. Johnson could apply all his tests later. There was nothing to see here except dust, recently disturbed.

He peered about the room. He did not want to use his torch in case the man on the railway parapet should be more curious than he seemed to be. It was dark in the house, darker than outside, of course. Even in June the sun did at last go down for a few hours. So he stood near the window in the fading light, staring about him, trying to discover the meaning of the unlocked door, the unused rooms, and the fresh footprints.

Whoever had been here had stayed some time. The marks went to and fro, up and down, blurring one another, crossing from end to end of the room, from window to door, back and forward, across and across, always ending or, perhaps, beginning, from the mean little fireplace with its rusty grate tipped up and fallen sideways. Whoever had been here had returned again and again to the fireplace. To lean on it, thinking or remembering? There was no furniture in the room. Abruptly David pulled himself together. There was another room on this floor, and one downstairs. Why was he wasting time?

He crossed the confusion of footsteps in the dust and made his way to the front room. Here he found signs of past occupation in a pile of ancient dirty blankets and torn rugs spread over one corner. There were some signs that this room had shared in the general damage to the front of the house. Behind the boards over the windows the wood of their gaping frames was charred, presumably by the same fire that had burned the front door.

It was difficult to see anything in this room and yet a torch would have sent a flicker down into the street. David stood considering. No one had come here of late. The dust was undisturbed. Yet this was a sort of resting place.

Then, why, in that other room—

He turned abruptly and went back, crossed to the fireplace, squatted beside it, peering into the chimney; he knelt at last and reached up its walls. Soot and plaster fell into the grate and a small object that rolled free of these. Shielding the light with his hand, David put on his torch and picked it up. It was a bobby pin, the kind that Jill used to have before her hair was cut short in the prevailing fashion.

It was enough. Johnson must take over from here. David went quickly downstairs and back through the kitchen. He would have liked to turn the tap at the sink to see if the water was running, but he refrained. He might wash away valuable evidence. Besides, the wetness there told him all he wanted to know. The tap had been used recently, whether the water was still on or not. It was not always difficult to manipulate the company's stopcock. Very often it was under a small cover near the area railings, or in the area itself. It would be easy to lift the cover, turn the cock with a spanner, and replace the cover in a matter of seconds. He determined to look for the cover as he went out.

If only it had not been so long since Terry saw murder done in this house. If this were the house. If only the boy had not been such a fool at the start. And then he softened to the thought of his confusion and distress. At that age he would most likely have done exactly the same thing himself.

Thinking of all this as he closed the back door behind him and slipped quietly into the passageway, he paused for a moment to light another cigarette, turning towards the wall to shield the flame of his lighter from the wind. It occurred to him, standing there, that the wooden door into the yard must have been put in after the disaster that had wrecked these houses. Otherwise it would have burned as the windows and doors had burned. He was still looking at the yard door when a voice behind him said, "Back again, are yer?"

David wheeled round and at first saw no one. The street was empty beyond the narrow passage. But as he stared he saw hands grasping the railings to the right of him, and a shaggy grey mop of hair above a lined, bearded face that looked at him from between the hands. The man next door had mounted his area steps; or rather stood part of the way up them; no doubt to

reach for the bottle of milk that stood on the pavement at the top.

When David turned, this apparition repeated his question, but as the former went towards him, the light from the street falling on his face, the man started, withdrew the hand that had grasped the milk bottle, and began to clamber back the way he had come.

"No offence, guv, no offence," he muttered, wrenching at his door in the area. "Forget it, mate. Me eyesight's not wot it were."

David ran quickly down the area steps before the man was well inside his door. He thrust a foot into the opening.

"Don't be frightened," he said, seeing the look of terror in the old man's eyes. "I won't hurt you. I just want you to answer my questions. Who did you think I was just now when you saw my back in the passage up there?"

"Copper, ain't yer?" said the old man, still more suspicious.

"No. Actually, I'm a doctor, but sometimes I do other jobs. Like this one."

"Sanitary, or something of that? Then let me tell you it's 'igh time this place was demolished or shut up. Living like pigs, we are, and they won't turn a hair for us unless there's a eviction order. Re-' ousing. It's a farce. I'm telling yer."

"Who did you think I was?" David asked again. He opened his wallet and took out a ten-shilling note. "I'm quite willing to buy your information."

His candour might have been fatal, but he had summed up the old man and deliberately took the risk. He was not disappointed.

"Garn!" The old eyes looked up at him with a rather shrinking cunning. "All that about a doctor! Think I didn't see frough yer at the start? You'd better be on the level," he went on, trying to regain control of his door. "No cosh tricks, mind."

"Come on," said David, patiently. "I've bought it. Let's have it."

"Come inside," said the old man, making up his mind suddenly. "No use making a broadcast of it."

David followed him into a dark and filthy little room, stuffed with old furniture and as dusty as the empty house next door. He did not fancy any of the greasy chairs and remained standing, but the old man sat down near the window.

“I don’t know oo ’e was,” he began. “I only saw ’im a couple of times. For why? ’ Cos I was away, see, at me married sister’s. Essex. That was wot made me let ’ im ’ave it, see?”

“Have what?” asked David, guessing the answer.

“Me barrer. It was like this. I come ‘ome one night last winter, and there was this chap, standing in the passage like ’e was waiting for something. ‘Excuse me,’ I says, not liking to push past. ’E watches me up-end the barrer and put the chain and padlock on the wheel and then ’e says, ‘I suppose you wouldn’t ’ ire it for a couple a weeks?’ Well, I’d arranged to go to me married sister in Essex for a bit to keep out of the fog that time of year, November, you understand. So I says, ‘You mean you’ll pay me for the use of it?’ And ’e says, ‘Sure.’ Like in a film, only ’ e were English, not American.”

“No accent at all?”

“Spoke just like you, sir.”

David was not flattered, but he was encouraged to go on. With a question here and there to keep things going, he was soon in possession of a most peculiar tale.

The stranger had borrowed the handcart for the princely sum of ten shillings a week, four weeks’ hire being paid on the nail. It was this that clinched the bargain. Old Harding did not have to dip into his savings, he explained, for his railway fare to Essex. He had never seen the man before, and though he was well dressed and prosperous-looking by Harding’s standards, the old man had a shrewd suspicion that he had been sheltering—you could not call it living—in the deserted house next door, for the last twenty-four hours at least. But he had thought it as well not to voice his suspicions. He had gone off to his sister and stayed away two months. When he came back the handcart was in its old place; he never saw the man again.

“Then you didn’t get the other month’s hire?” asked David.

Harding gave him a sly look.

“Never expected it.”

“Weren’t you afraid you’d never see the cart again?”

“It did cross me mind. But it warn’t worth the two quid ’e give me. And I’d always a bin able to lay me ’and on another.”

“But going away, where you couldn’t have known what was happening to the cart! I mean, what was he using it for?”

Again Harding narrowed his eyes in an expression of deepest

guile.

"It suited ' is book to 'ave the barrer," he said, "and it suited mine to be well shut of it. And I won't say no more'n that. Let by-gorns be by-gorns."

There was a pause.

"What do you usually use the barrow for?" asked David.

"Rag and bones. But trade's bin bad this twelvemonth."

David looked at him thoughtfully. Bones. Rags.

"Did you collect anything of that sort from this man who took your cart?"

Harding answered at once; too readily, perhaps, David thought. Almost as if he had prepared himself for that very question.

"No. I only saw 'im twice. When ' e come out the passage in the fog night before, and next morning when 'e was there, looking the barrer over. It's my belief if I ' adn't gorn up when I did, 'e'd ' ave pinched it."

"In spite of the padlock you said you had on it. By the way, I don't see one on it now."

"No. ' E must 'ave mislaid the lock," said Harding, unblushingly. David let this pass.

"So you think he might have stolen it, given the chance. Very likely. You say you saw him the night before?"

"That's why I come to the conclusion, like, 'e spent the night in next door. Rare fog, it were, that night. I never put me 'ead out after midday, but the once. Aboutten, that were. Didn't 'ear nothing of ' im, I must say."

"Then you wouldn't know if there was anyone with him? You didn't hear any voices, if not that night, then the next morning?"

Harding shook his head.

"I sleeps 'eavy," he said. "An' I sleeps late, as a rule. There were nothing to rouse up for that day. I lay in all morning. Good for the lungs, eh?"

David could get no more out of him, but it was enough. This, as he had told himself before, was where Johnson must turn on the machine.

As he walked away in the direction of his parked car David glanced back. No one had drawn the curtains yet, and nearly all the windows were open to the cooling night air. The confusion of wireless programmes and television competed with hoarse

human voices bawling above the din. The ruined houses he had just left stood silent in the midst of this babel. Their boarded windows made a blank space between the lights on either side. There was nothing now to draw attention to the old tragedy of their first ruin, and nothing at all to suggest a later horror.

7 David Takes Action

I

It was barely ten o'clock when David left the scene of his latest, discoveries, and not half-past ten when he arrived at Scotland Yard. Johnson was off duty and had gone home, but he was soon at the other end of the line.

"Do you mean to say you let this old chap Harding know you were up to something, and then walked out and left him with a perfectly free hand?"

"Free to do what?"

"Muck about in the house next door to his heart's content. Warn any of his shady friends who may have been mixed up with this house. Half a dozen things he could be doing. Didn't you say this place was unlocked? Which wants looking into for a start."

"He struck me as cunning and a bit of a twister, perhaps, but not criminal."

The inspector made an explosive noise at the other end of the line.

"I wish I'd known you were going down there. I'd have gone with you."

"Then we shouldn't have got anything. At least we shouldn't have got anything from old Harding. It was only his mistaking me for—someone else—that surprised him into talking."

"Did he tell you his name was Harding?1"

"Yes. Why?"

"The name is familiar. I'll have to go down there straight away. Who's with you now?"

David handed over the receiver, and stood by while the work was organized. He came back on the line before Johnson rang off.

"Can I join you in Battersea?"

"Better not. We shall attract enough attention as it is."

"You don't think of waiting until the morning?"

"And let your old man next door have another twelve hours to

destroy evidence? Not likely."

"I don't think he could do much harm. There was definitely something hidden in the chimney, and someone had been to remove it. I think I know what it was, and I expect you do, too. Assuming, of course, that this is the right house at last, and that the man who borrowed the handcart was Rust. I don't know why he came back, or why he should want to disturb something so well hidden, especially as we have hitherto not traced the house. But he must have had an urgent reason to behave as he has. Perhaps you will find more in the chimney than the bobby pin I pulled down. I will leave this exhibit here at Scotland Yard for you."

David went home. If Steve Mitchell had been at the Yard he would have persuaded Johnson to take him along to the ruined house, but the superintendent had left some hours before at the end of a normal day's work. So there was nothing to be done.

Jill was still up when he reached home. She listened to his news and at the end of it made much the same criticism as Johnson had done.

"Do you think I ought to have whistled for the copper on the beat, and asked him why the hell he hadn't noticed the back door was unlocked, and told him I had just been trespassing in the bombed house and why? He'd have called an ambulance to take me to the loony bin."

"I think you might have gone to a public telephone and rung up Inspector Johnson."

"And then gone and sat on the area steps for a couple of hours, loitering with intent; or in the car, equally suspicious? That isn't the kind of neighbourhood where you can be eccentric without attracting attention."

"I suppose not. If they decide that a crime was committed in that house, and it could have been Terry's crime, how does that help things on?"

"Taken with Harding's description of the man who hired his barrow, it helps a lot. It is the first likely clue to Harold Rust that has come in so far. Johnson will have to trace the barrow and the man to Waterbury Street if he can, or at any rate trace some connection between them. I'm prepared to learn there is

something fishy about old Harding, but his exclamation when he saw my back was spontaneous and genuine; I'd swear to that."

"So we only have to find a man with your back view, and we can call him Rust, whatever he says his name is," suggested Jill hopefully.

"Yes, my darling. You put these things so well. It is exactly as easy as that."

"There must be thousands," went on Jill, dreamily.

"Thousands of what?"

"Back views about like yours."

"Thanks, enormously."

"How tall is Mr. Hilton?"

"A bit shorter than me."

"And build?"

"Oh, yes, he'd do. As you say, there must be thousands. That friend of his, Sims. He'd do. The housekeeper.… No. I jib at male impersonation. Who else have I seen at Boxwood? A couple of tradespeople. The porter at the station. The newsagent's boy. No. He was definitely shorter, and very much thinner."

"You'd better go down again, and check yourself up on everyone you see."

"But Peter—it is easier to call him Peter—need not necessarily be a Boxwood acquaintance. He has to know Hilton, but not necessarily at his home."

"I thought after the burglary you decided he did come from Boxwood."

"Johnson did. I kept an open mind."

Jill was silent for a time. At last she said, "If it was the poor thing's head that was stuffed up the chimney, why didn't he leave it there? Without the fresh footmarks you would not have suspected the house."

"From Terry's story I would."

"Oh, yes, Terry's story. But that's one of the things the murderer can't possibly know. He must think the house is beyond suspicion. So why can't he leave well alone?"

David considered.

"I think," he said, "the man got the wind up at some stage. Either that, or he is deliberately pursuing Hilton. Those bones in the barrow where Hilton was digging must have been planted on purpose to incriminate him, and no other."

"Unless Hilton put them there."

"Yes. That is becoming the police view. But I don't somehow feel it is right. Let us assume Hilton is innocent and speaks the truth. Then he is being attacked in an effort to foist guilt on to him."

"In that case," said Jill, "the head is going to be transferred to a place where it will count against Hilton."

"In fact, to the barrow," said David, "I think it very likely. The next time Hilton goes there to dig. And who will say, this next time, if it is there and is identified, as it could be from the teeth fillings, that Hilton dug up his own wife's head by chance? Or better, that he buried it by chance for the vicar to dig up?"

"How utterly devilish," said Jill. "Do you know when Hilton is going to Duckington again?"

"I can find out."

"We'd better be there. David!"

Her husband looked at her suddenly eager face.

"Got an idea, darling?"

"Don't be so surprised. A splendid idea. Find out when Hilton is going down to dig. Don't tell him, but we both go too, and hide near the barrow."

"Not too easy in broad daylight. There isn't much cover up there."

"Is he likely to operate in broad daylight?"

"In the ordinary way, yes."

"But not in an extraordinary way. That would be done in the dark. We wait until he or someone else comes, and surprise them."

"What? Jump out and say 'Boo'?"

"Something better than that. The inspector would have to be there and some policemen too, to make the arrest."

"I hardly think Johnson is likely to fall in with your simple scheme. But I'll mention it to him. I'm afraid we're likely to have to act on our own."

And so it seemed as the days went by. David was busy again at St. Edmund's about this time, and had no opportunity to get in touch with Scotland Yard until nearly a week had passed.

Then Johnson rang him up. The chief-inspector seemed to

have forgiven him for his piece of individual research. He invited David to come to Whitehall. There was a good deal, he said, that would interest him.

The chief-inspector repeated this as he settled David in a chair at his office.

"Because, you see," he went on, "old man Harding is a dear old friend of ours. Rags and bones may be on the level, and then again they may not. In Harding's case it's about fifty-fifty. When trade is slack, he helps it along, shall we say? Not the direct job; he's too old and corny for that. But the siftings: the unsaleable stuff: the bits and pieces of clothing pulled out of the drawers to wrap up the jewellery. Push it in the sack and give the old boy something for his trouble. It'll be paper pulp before anyone can catch up on it, no questions asked, no traces in a dustbin or a fireplace to upset the applecart."

He paused to light a pipe, then pointed the stem at David.

"You should have heard the names he called you, when I had my little conversation with him. Said he was right first off you were a dick, and then you called yourself a doctor, and he didn't like to disbelieve a gentleman."

"He did, though. He made up his mind, soon after that, I was a crook, and the man who borrowed his cart had double-crossed me."

"I see. No wonder he felt sore."

"I suppose you got a lot more out of him than I did?"

"Not so much. Only I was able to insist he didn't do all he did for two quid. Not in these days. The underworld has changed its tariff with the inflation, just like the rest of us."

"Go on."

"He kept away in Essex because the man told him he might want the cart for longer than four weeks, and something warned the old boy he was better ignorant of the other's business. I believe him there. He still doesn't have an inkling. He'll throw a fit when he knows what's been carried on his barrow."

"You've proved it, then?"

"I'll come to that in a minute. There was one other thing of great importance. The man not only gave him the money, but a bundle of rags as well."

"Rags? Don't you mean a woman's clothes?"

"You thought of that, of course. First thing that crossed my

mind. Yes, a couple of old blankets, which he says were sopping wet, as if they'd been washed, but not properly dried, and some torn clothes."

"Wasn't he suspicious? A complete set of women's clothes, appearing out of an empty house, or at any rate, passed over to him by a man, apparently living alone?"

"It wasn't a complete set. Master Peter is careful. There was a topcoat, a hat, very much the worse for wear, a pair of shoes, and an elastic corset belt. That was all."

"That would leave only a dress or skirt and jumper or blouse, and the other underclothes, which would take up no room at all in these days of nylon. The dress or skirt would be the only thing of substance to handle."

"There were sacks on the cart when Mr. Rust arrived at Mrs. Hunt's. No one looked inside them. He'd need to use something thick to wrap the—er—meat in when it was fresh."

"You're getting hardened," said David, grimly.

"I'm an old hand. Even so, we needed to be tough. We got our fill in that house."

David gave a sigh of relief.

"Jill was terrified you wouldn't be there in time. She imagines a sinister hand always destroying the evidence just before we reach it."

"Not a bad summing up. Old Harding only destroyed those clothes at the end of last week."

"Last *week*?"

"Just so. He was out of business, wasn't he, till he came back? So before he went away he put the bundle with his other stock. That was something Rust didn't think of. Day by day as he got the remains away piecemeal from that ruined house, day by day as he risked exposure by going back there with the barrow, enough evidence to blow him sky-high was lying in the corner of Harding's basement room."

"Damn Terry Byrnes!" said David fiercely.

"We have," said Johnson. "Though he's a good kid, really," he added with a smile. "He'll never hold out on the police again as long as he lives."

David was not listening.

"Don't you think it's a bit odd no one in that street noticed what this man was up to?" he asked.

“I bet they did notice. But they don’t interfere with one another. That’s a rule. Don’t get mixed up. Don’t get into anything, by mistake or otherwise. Probably thought Rust was carrying on Harding’s business while he was away, and they must have known Harding’s been sent up from time to time.”

“What evidence, exactly, did you get from that house?”

Chief-Inspector Johnson drew on his pipe for a minute or two.

“Blood stains in the angle of the wood on the windowsill. It must have been washed off the sill and the floor. Blood in some of the plaster scrapings from the chimney. As you suggested it was probably only the head that he hid there. We got one or two dark hairs and traces of tissue that may have been skin from the face or scalp. They are making sections of these. Incidentally the blood was of the same group as the specimens we got in Waterbury Street. The skin and so on was at a much lower level in the chimney than the hair.”

“The head would probably shrink after decomposition of the flesh and with drying in the current of air in the chimney; and then come down some way. I wonder you didn’t find more. But perhaps there wasn’t much decomposition if the drying process was accelerated.”

Johnson nodded.

“We had those gales after the fogs, if you remember.”

“What else?”

“Human remains in the drainage system. They all try to wash things away, and so much always sticks at the bends. Not enough to cause obstruction or bad smells, but enough for our scientists, thank Heaven.”

David took a deep breath.

“So that settles it,” he said.

But Johnson shook his head.

“It settles very little. Not nearly enough. We’ve proved Terry was right. There’s been a murder in that house, I’d take my oath, and by a man who borrowed a handcart on the very day Mr. Rust took one to Waterbury Street. But we haven’t got a body, and I very much doubt we’ll ever get anything more than a few poor bones. And we’d never convict on that, even supposing we found the man Rust, who is as shadowy as ever.”

“Not quite,” said David. He repeated the theory he had given to Jill. “Give him enough rope in this mad scheme of his to

incriminate Hilton, and he'll hang himself in the end. I'd bet you quite a lot on that."

Again Johnson shook his head.

"Hilton's my chief suspect," he said. "I by-pass all your highfalutin stuff."

"Hilton is not Peter."

"Prove it."

"I will if you let me."

David proposed his scheme. But Johnson would not hear of giving him police assistance.

"Waste of time," he said. "I'd make myself a laughingstock playing amateur dramatics on the downs in broad daylight. Besides, he'd be warned."

"Not necessarily. I don't propose to ask Hilton when he's going to Duckington again. There are other ways of finding out without letting him know. And if anyone takes a head to that barrow to plant it for Hilton or the vicar to find, he won't do it in broad daylight."

"Worse and worse," Johnson laughed. "Moonlight! Midsummer madness!"

"Quite a good excuse for going up to the downs late," said David. "Thanks for the idea. And you may have neglected to notice that there won't be a moon next week end. It would be interesting to know if Hilton is going to be away, and who, if anyone, has persuaded him to it?"

There were two ways of finding out if Hilton had any archaeological projects for the near future, David decided. One was to ask him directly, and the other was to ask someone who knew him. Since the housekeeper might be indiscreet, and the only friend of Hilton's he knew of was Basil Sims, he determined to go down to Boxwood, visit Sims's house on some pretext or other, and lead the conversation round to digging. He also decided to take Jill with him: it would make the expedition less formal, and Mrs. Sims had, after all, issued a sort of invitation when he first saw her, and one that included Jill in its rather vague terms.

His heart sank a little as he recalled his encounter with Margaret Sims. He had gone to her house a few days after the

burglary at the Willows. He had announced himself as a friend of Hilton's, which was true in intention; a doctor interested in his heart trouble, which was true in fact; and a seeker of news of Felicity. In the course of a conversation as wayward as, though far less brilliant than, the flight of a dragon-fly, he grasped only one helpful fact: that Basil Sims had been confined to the house with tonsillitis the evening before, and the day after, the burglary.

"Anyway, I'm coming, invitation or not," Jill announced. "How are we going? Car?"

"Unhappily, no," answered her husband. "They haven't finished tracing the fault in the self-starter. It will be a very expensive trip: we shall have to go by train."

"You went by train last time."

"I can't help that. It will mean two return tickets instead of one."

"Aren't there any day tickets?"

"Starting at four in the afternoon? I should very much doubt it. And not that way round. People are expected to want a cheap day in the Metropolis, bless their deluded hearts, not a cheap day in the country."

"Suburbia," said Jill.

"They call it the country, God help them. But it has its advantages; and I don't mean suburbia, I mean going by train. The Simses live reasonably near the station. Nearer than Hilton, though in the same direction."

"Shall we be seeing him?"

"No. Which means we ought, strictly, not to ring up the Simses. On the other hand it doesn't look so frightfully spontaneous to drop in by train as it would in the car."

"Very true. So what?"

"I think I will ring them from the station when we get there. I'll think of a story on the way down."

It was a fairly long story, about a breakdown, and the London garage sending a breakdown van out, and the train up due in half an hour, and could they pay their respects?

Basil wasn't home yet, Mrs. Sims said, if he wasn't on the station now, but please come. Was it too late for tea? Probably. But time for a quick one.

"She's very affable," said David, leaving the station telephone

booth to rejoin Jill. “Quite welcoming. Come along.”

Jill moved forward.

“And leave *Picture Post* behind, unless you’ve paid for it,” said David.

A polite voice beside them said, “Excuse me, madam,” as Jill turned abruptly. A man was pulling down the front of the station bookstall, to close it for the day.

“Oh, please,” said Jill, diving under the half drawn shutter to replace the magazine she had been reading. She emerged again, rather breathless.

“I’m sure my wife has had quite fourpennyworth of pleasure from that paper,” said David, producing coins. “Even if she has put it back.”

“Thank you, sir,” said the man. He leaned forward in his turn and took out the *Picture Post* again, putting it in David’s hand and receiving the money.

Jill and David turned away. At the exit they paused, while David found their tickets.

“It would do,” said Jill, looking back along the platform.

“What would? And what for?”

“It would do for you,” she enlarged, and waved her hand towards the bookstall. “The back view, I mean.”

The newsagent was still closing his stall. He had his back to them, and his build was not unlike David’s own.

“Moreover,” said Jill, “I can tell you what he was reading inside his little cubby hole behind the shelves, because I was amusing myself looking through the glass.”

“Have I spent fourpence for nothing?”

“No. I’ll read the *Picture Post* in the train going back. Don’t you want to know what he was reading?”

“That magazine on archaeology, I suppose?”

“Just that. *The Archaeologist*.”

“Not seriously?”

“Quite seriously.”

“Oh, dear me!” said David. “Hilton. Sims. And now this fellow! All so tenuous, so hopelessly vague.”

“Never mind,” said Jill. “I’ll ask Mrs. Sims if she ever calls her husband Peter, shall I?”

Basil Sims arrived just as the Wintringhams were leaving. He had been kept in town, he said. His business was hell in the

summer: it was their rush time, with foreign buyers, particularly. While he explained himself, he kept raising his eyebrows at his wife, as if he were desperately trying to find out by signal what all this was in aid of, so that he could take the correct line with the visitors. But Margaret Sims was helpless. These Wintringhams were quite nice people, but their call was most peculiar and utterly pointless. Except for the breakdown. Only why send for a London garage? Wasn't Billings good enough for them?

"Did you ask them that?" asked Basil, returning from the gate after showing them out of the garden.

"Yes. They didn't seem to have heard of Billings."

"Why should they?"

"Why not? Seen the garage, I mean. You can't go through Boxwood from end to end as they have, coming from London, without passing the crossroads. Why didn't they go to Alastair's? They seem to know him and Felicity. It was about her, you remember, that Dr. Wintringham came here the first time. Mrs. Wintringham kept mentioning her."

"If they know the Hiltons, then they know he's away. Or didn't they seem to know that?"

"They knew he was going, but they didn't know when exactly."

"Did you tell them he was away?"

"I can't remember. Yes, I must have. I said something about him being back next Monday."

Basil Sims nodded.

"I hope you told them he had gone to Duckington for a few days' peace and quiet, and perhaps," he added softly, "to do a little digging."

"Yes, we talked about his hobby. Dr. Wintringham asked if you were going, too."

Mr. Sims looked very much astonished.

"Me? Why me?"

"Oh, I don't know. Except, as Dr. Wintringham said, you have taken to archaeology lately."

"Really, Margaret, how absurd! I found Alastair's magazine less boring than I imagined, on the one or two occasions I took it up to him, so I started taking it myself, to learn a little history in an amusing way. That hardly constitutes making a hobby of the

subject."

"All right. All right." Mrs. Sims stared resentfully at her husband. "I don't see why you should bite my head off for saying a simple thing like that."

There was a message for David when he got home. It was from Chief-Inspector Johnson, asking him to get in touch in the morning. David went round at lunch time.

"Hilton's done a bunk," the inspector told him.

"Why do you say that?"

"He's gone to Duckington again."

"If he left his address I don't think you can call it a technical bunk. He made no secret of it. Mrs. Sims told us he went on Wednesday."

"What you said about the moon," began Johnson, and stopped.

"Oh yes. Jill and I are thinking of going down there ourselves. In fact, we've booked a room at the Royal Arms for Saturday night."

"Not the White Hart?"

"Well, no. We want to keep on the outside; better experimental conditions that way."

"I might come myself, after all," said Johnson.

David smiled at him.

"Any particular reason?"

"Yes. I was down at Boxwood yesterday checking up on Mrs. Hilton's clothes. It was a convenience having him out of the way. The housekeeper, Mrs. Mason, was quite helpful. There's a lot of stuff missing, and it's my belief it's been got rid of by degrees. Mrs. Mason says Mrs. Hilton came for things from time to time. But I think he's the one chiefly responsible. What do you think I found in the dustbin?"

"Mrs. Hilton's feather boa?"

"I'm serious," said Johnson severely. "I found Hilton's old mac that was supposed to have been burgled. Under a lot of ashes and that. I'm having it examined for stains. I'm not at all sure he didn't stage the burglary himself."

"Why should he?"

"To cover up disposing of Mrs. Hilton's clothes. And to get rid

of that mac, perhaps."

"But why put it in the dustbin? Knowing how long they take to come and empty things. Much more likely someone else planted it for you to find. Part of this attempt to place suspicion on Hilton. Anyway, why should he bother to dispose of his wife's clothes? At this particular moment, too?"

"If he didn't, where are they?"

"There now," said David. "Now you *have* given me an idea."

"What are you doing?" Jill asked.

"Writing out an advertisement in block capitals."

He showed her a piece of paper. On it she read: "UNPAID HOTEL BILLS. WHY SUFFER THE ABSCONDING GUEST? DISCRETION AND TACT A SPECIALTY. ADVICE FREE."

"For the local trade journals," said David. "Particularly in the Battersea area."

"I don't understand,"

"Unless Harding took over more than he confesses to, and Johnson thinks not, somewhere," he told her, "according to my theory, there is an irate landlady, or perhaps more than one, still hanging on to a suitcase or two containing clothes belonging to Felicity Hilton."

"Oh! Oh, I see," said Jill. "You mean because Rust had so little personal luggage with him? Won't Inspector Johnson have thought of that one?"

"Perhaps. But not of my method."

"Advice," said Jill. "Free. But David, you can't! They'll come here! What about Mrs. Matthews? She'll leave in a week. What about Nanny? I can't risk upsetting her now. She's our last stand-by."

"I don't really believe that. And now the children are all off her hands I think she leads a thoroughly pampered existence. But she won't be upset. You'll see. She'll rise to the occasion like a—like a—Well, never mind like what."

"A heroine," said Jill fondly. "But perhaps no one will come for advice, after all."

"Perhaps," said David, folding up his advertisement. "It's worth trying, though."

II

Mrs. Norbury was worried, and, for the second time that year, Mr. Hilton was the cause of it. He seemed to her to be going downhill at an alarming pace.

"That man's ill," she said to Norah. "Properly ill. He ought to see a doctor."

"Why doesn't he?"

"It's not for want of a hint," went on Mrs. Norbury. "The minute I set eyes on him, I said, 'Oh, Mr. Hilton, you do look done up! You oughtn't to drive all this way at the end of a day's work.' 'Hardly a full day,' he said, with that funny little smile of his. 'I left town at three. I've been taking my time over it.' And so he must have done, not getting here till seven."

"He stopped for his tea, I expect," said Norah.

"He may have. He's not much hand at tea, as a rule. So then I told him straight he ought to see a doctor. And what d'you think he said?"

Norah could not think. Mrs. Norbury lowered her voice.

"He said, 'Doctors can't cure damaged hearts.' Then he went off to his room. What bothers me is, which way did he mean it? Broken heart, meaning he's unhappy, or something wrong with his heart. His tone was bitter, if you know what I mean, and sort of hopeless. I don't like it at all."

"It wouldn't do to have anything happen here—in the season, too," said Norah, with practised calm.

"You mustn't say such things!" responded Mrs. Norbury at once. "We ought to think of Mr. Hilton for his own sake."

And though, as a business woman, she could not help agreeing with Norah that all steps must be taken to prevent a public disaster at the hotel; as a kindhearted, sentimentally inclined person her greater concern was for the man himself. It was Thursday, and he was staying until Sunday evening. No doubt he intended to do some more of his digging, since he had brought the haversack, with his tools in it; the trowels and little pick, and the long thin crowbars that had given Daisy's imagination such a jolt. But if she could persuade him, he'd leave the digging till Saturday, when he'd had a chance to rest.

She took matters into her own hands and, without consulting Hilton, rang up Mr. Symonds, the vicar.

This bold move succeeded beyond her expectation, for Mr. Symonds arrived at the White Hart that same evening, and spent over an hour with Mr. Hilton in the residents' lounge. And the upshot of it all was that Hilton agreed to join an expedition to the Saxon farmhouse on the Saturday, an all day expedition. The vicar accepted his offer of transport for some of the members, including himself, who were making up the party. He was to bring his car to the vicarage at ten in the morning, Mr. Symonds said. They parted very cordially, and Hilton went up to his room immediately afterwards.

That was on Wednesday evening. And on Thursday morning Mrs. Norbury saw with satisfaction that the downs were lost in grey cloud, while a steady drizzle fell on Duckington itself.

"You'll never think of going up there today, Mr. Hilton, will you?" she said, stopping him in the hall as he was leaving the dining-room after breakfast.

"No," he answered, smiling at her. "I've plenty of time before Sunday. All tomorrow, if this rain clears off. Saturday is booked with the local society: an invitation from Mr. Symonds. It was kind of him to call last night. I suppose you told him I was here?"

"Yes, I did," said Mrs. Norbury. "I hope you didn't mind. I knew he'd want to show you that fresh place they're working at." She hesitated, then went on. "If you meant anything by what you said about your heart, I don't think you ought to go in for this digging. I don't really."

"So that was why he came." Mr. Hilton did not seem to be annoyed, but he did not seem to be impressed, either. "I was joking, of course," he added.

"I don't believe that."

Mrs. Norbury, quite shocked by her own boldness, felt her cheeks go hot. But Hilton only laughed.

"You spoil me," he said. "But naturally, I enjoy it."

As he turned to the staircase he said: "I shall put on the fire in my room and have a thoroughly lazy day. Will that please you?"

"It'll do you a world of good," she replied gaily, not answering his question. And then she went on to her kitchen, wondering why she felt so cheerful on such an altogether lousy morning.

The rain continued. On Thursday night, instead of stopping when a wind came up to blow away the clouds, fresh clouds arrived, and the rain, no longer a summer drizzle, lashed the windows of the White Hart with a most unreasonable fury. Mr. Hilton spent a second day of total inaction, and seemed to enjoy it. Mrs. Norbury gave thanks to Providence for coming so signally to her aid.

"He looks a different being," she said to Norah, on Friday evening, when the girl passed her, taking coffee to the lounge.

"He'll be up to anything tomorrow if it clears," said Norah.

"The vicar won't let him," replied Mrs. Norbury. "They're making a day of it out at Flitton. It'll only be looking at what they've done, and going round that museum place they've set up in the remains of the barn."

"But some of them dig," said Norah. "I know because of what Fred Stiles told me."

"I warned Mr. Symonds to stop him if he tried," said Mrs. Norbury. "But don't you let on to him, even if he asks you."

"He's not likely to," answered Norah. She thought her employer was making too much of the visitor; taking quite a personal interest. She looked at Mrs. Norbury with curious eyes, and the latter turned away, feeling more disturbed than she had at any time since Pat Norbury's death.

The Wintringhams drove down to Duckington on Saturday afternoon. They settled themselves in the room they had booked at the Royal Arms, and then went down to the big lounge hall where they could sit and watch the traffic in and out of the hotel doors. Chief-Inspector Johnson had arranged to meet them there at six. He was exactly punctual.

"Drinks, I think," said David. "Before we get down to briefing."

"I've been in to see the parson," began Johnson, when they were all served. "I rather wish I hadn't."

"Why?" asked Jill. "Doesn't he want to help?"

"That's the trouble," replied Johnson. "He does. Much too eager, in fact. Of course, he has no idea Hilton is the man we're after."

"I'm not after Hilton," said David.

"And not only the parson," went on Johnson, ignoring this interruption, "but the chief constable in these parts, who turns

out to be a buddy of Parson's from World War I."

David nodded his head slowly.

"So they want to come along with us, do they? Show us how to lie for an indefinite period in a muddy trench, I suppose?"

"They'll come along with us, I'm afraid," said Johnson. "And probably give the whole show away."

Jill looked thoughtfully into the distance.

"I don't suppose there'll be any show to give away," she said. "After all, Mr. Hilton has been in Duckington since Wednesday evening, hasn't he? He's had plenty of time to do what he came to do. If it is Mr. Hilton."

"It isn't," said David. "If it's the man I'm beginning to feel sure it is, he won't come to Duckington until after dark, and he'll be on his way directly he's finished."

"You think it'll be someone on a motor-bike, the chap who spoke to Joe in this hotel the time before?"

"Yes."

"That could have been Hilton," said the inspector.

"Possibly it could, last time. Not this."

"That remains to be seen, and proved."

"Certainly it does."

They sipped their drinks in an amiable silence, each confident of the validity of his own reasoning. Presently Johnson said, "Though I think Hilton is my man I'm pretty sure he hasn't acted yet. From what Mr. Symonds told me."

He described how bad the weather had been in Duckington on Thursday and Friday and how Hilton had spent the whole time indoors at the White Hart.

"Mr. Symonds can't know that," said Jill.

"On the contrary, the parson had it from the proprietress there when he was at the hotel waiting for Hilton this morning. I saw Mr. Symonds before I came on here, and he was only just back from a day at Flitton Marsh, where they've found some old building or other. Hilton drove him to this place, together with two more of the party that went over, and he brought the same men back. He'd been with them since ten this morning, and when they walked over to the White Hart to join him before starting he'd only just left the breakfast table. That was when Symonds spoke to Mrs. Norbury."

"Couldn't he have gone out during the night?"

"Very unlikely, unless he climbed out and back through his bedroom window. It's only a small place, the White Hart. Mrs. Norbury locks up at eleven-thirty unless one of the guests wants to come in late. But that isn't often. Her clientele is chiefly tired Londoners down for long nights, and days in the open."

"How delightful that sounds," said Jill. "I think we ought to stay at the White Hart sometime, David."

But her husband was not listening to her.

"All right," he said to Johnson. "Then we're all agreed that my theory will be tested tonight or not at all. How are we going to work it?"

"I shall walk up," said Johnson, "and I advise you to do the same. We don't want any cars in the road near the track to the downs. I'm staying with a retired sergeant from the county police who lives about three miles from here. I don't need to say anything to the local chaps at this stage. Mr. Symonds is going to meet me in the road where the track leaves it."

"We've got a map," said David. "We thought of walking up, naturally. Did you get the detail of the barrows from Symonds?"

"Yes. We can check it now, if you like."

The vicar's large-scale chart of the barrows on the down was not very easy to correlate with an ordnance survey map, one inch to the mile, which was all the Wintringhams had been able to get hold of. But they copied the chart on a separate piece of paper, and as the important barrow lay at one end of the group they felt sure they would not miss it. The only cover thereabouts was provided by the other barrows. They would have to wait in their shadow, Johnson said, and trust to luck. The whole thing was a matter of luck. There might be nothing in it at all.

"It is very unscientific to say so," said Jill. "But I *know* there is something in it. The reasoning may be scatty, but we hope we are following a murderer's mind, and that always *is* scatty."

"See you at the barrow, then," said Johnson, as calmly as if the appointment were at Scotland Yard. "Wear something dark, Mrs. Wintringham, won't you? And keep down when you've done your bit."

"Are you afraid he'll be armed?" asked Jill solemnly.

"They often are," said Johnson, as he turned to walk away.

David and Jill went up to their room a few minutes later. So they missed a new visitor who passed through the lounge hall on his way to the men's cloakroom. But a few minutes later Joe, in the public bar, did not miss him. The man was wearing crumpled jeans pushed into thick grey socks, and a dirty fawn-coloured windcheater. The thick oilskins were absent, and the leather balaclava. But Joe recognized him as soon as he caught sight of a pair of goggles set on a forehead above cold grey-blue eyes. He served the motor-cyclist with a pint of bitter, and watched him pour it down his throat with a steady hand. He said nothing, however. If he had not been tied to the bar he would have gone out to look at the stranger's machine, and any luggage fastened to it, but as it was, he could not even get to the telephone until after nine. By which time the vicar had gone out. Mrs. Symonds knew he was with Colonel Wetherall, but she did not know where they had gone.

It was dusk when David and Jill came out on flat ground at the top of the path leading up the down. Below them a light mist hung over Duckington; in front the hills rose and fell in smooth waves towards the coast, while far to the west, in the gap of a valley, a small straight line of indigo showed them where lay the sea.

"I'd like to walk straight to it," said Jill, "until we could stand on the cliffs and look down at it."

"It wouldn't be straight," said David. "Not walking."

"Then I'd like to fly."

"Yes. The hills make you feel like taking off, don't they? We can walk towards it for a bit. According to my map the barrows are southwest of our present position."

They found them fairly easily, though in the fading light any large swelling in the turf looked as if it could have been made by man. They found the whole site corresponded exactly to their map, but it was not so easy to decide which of the two end barrows was the one they wanted. While they were discussing the problem they heard voices on the down behind them. David immediately pulled Jill down with him behind the nearest mound, where they waited in silence.

The newcomers, Mr. Symonds, Colonel Wetherall, and Chief-

Inspector Johnson, approached in a leisurely fashion, with no attempt at concealment. They stood for a few minutes, talking in low voices.

"Mind you, it's most likely a wild-goose chase," Johnson was saying. "We know the chap I suspect has been staying here for three days, and if he wanted to get rid of anything as incriminating as a head he'd have done it by now."

"Incriminating and unspeakably gruesome," said the vicar, with a shake in his voice. "Could anyone be so callous as to harbour such a thing in his room for three days before getting rid of it?"

"Callous, my foot!" said the colonel. "Man in fear of his life doesn't indulge in the finer feelings. Too bloody scared."

"We'd better get off the skyline," said Johnson. "It would be a pity to put him off if he really is coming "

"I doubt if anyone could see us now," the vicar said nervously. "I'm afraid the Wintringhams will miss their way in the dark, if they have not already done so in the mist below the hill."

"That's their pigeon," said Colonel Wetherall, briskly stepping round the end of the barrow where David and Jill were crouching. "I'm going to take cover here, and there should be room for—death and damnation!"

David had rolled out of the way before the colonel trod on him, but his heel had caught the latter's ankle a smart blow, and now Colonel Wetherall was hopping to and fro, grating out curses in breathless jerks, while the vicar implored him to say what had happened, and Johnson stooped over the Wintringhams, who were trying to control their laughter.

"At any rate," David told him, "we can't be seen from the path." He struggled to his feet. "I'm terribly sorry, sir," he said, peering through the dusk in the direction of Colonel Wetherall, who was now trying to recover his breath. "The barrows make very good cover, don't they?"

The colonel replied stiffly that they did, and after a more subdued conversation—the whole party seemed now to feel that whispers were preferable to full speech—they settled themselves behind two of the barrows and relapsed into silence.

"How long are we going to keep it up?" David whispered to Johnson, forty minutes later.

"Make a night of it, as we're here," replied the inspector.

“It doesn’t seem such a good idea as it did,” David answered. “But I’m sure you’re right. Only, I never did get much kick out of negative experiments.”

“Better not talk,” said Johnson. “Voices carry at night.”

“So do other noises,” said Jill. “Can you hear that motor-bike? I think it’s coming up the path.”

Johnson crawled to the end of the barrow and put his head round it. When he crawled back he whispered: “There’s something down the path. I think it’s the bike; I can’t hear the engine now. No lights. I’m going over to warn the others. If I haven’t time to get back—I mean if someone comes this way—I’ll stop there with them. Don’t make a sound till you hear him going away, and only if he’s been messing about with the end barrow. And you get down and stay down, Mrs. Wintringham, if there’s any trouble.”

“I’ll see she does,” said David.

They heard Johnson moving until he passed the end of the mound against which they lay. Then they heard nothing more.

Suddenly Jill clutched at David’s arm. There were sounds on the path, a faint clatter, a slight scuffling, and little panting noises, very light and breathy. Jill’s hand clenched more tightly. Something was approaching the barrows out of the darkness, but what? Surely not a child, or children? Something strange, something not of this world?

“Sheep,” breathed David in her ear. She choked on a laugh, and instantly his hand came to cover her mouth. “Someone started them up. Listen.”

The unseen sheep rustled past, pushing into one another, their little hard feet clicking on the occasional chalk stones in the grass. Another sound came to her ears: the regular faint thud of feet moving rapidly. Abruptly, the sound ceased. Someone had reached the barrows. As all the watchers pressed close to their protecting mounds, a thin wavering shaft of light played past them. Whoever had come was using a torch to light his activities.

These were not long in doubt. The stranger began to dig, and under cover of the noise he made David whispered to Jill triumphantly: “The millionth chance. It’s come off!”

“When do I—”

“Not yet. I’ll tell you when.”

The digging went on for about fifteen minutes, then there was a pause, during which they heard a petrol lighter click on, and presently a faint smell of tobacco floated to them across the barrow. Soon after there was some scuffling, some deep breathing, and then the sounds of digging began again.

"Now," breathed David. Jill rose to her knees, her face level with the top of the mound.

The torch had been put out when the stranger took his rest, and had not been relit. The whole scene lay in darkness; there was not even the light of stars, for the sky was overcast. Though her eyes were by now well accustomed to the gloom, Jill could scarcely make out the shape of the barrow where the noise went on, still less the outline of the moving form on the other side of it.

Into the dark a thin sound cut, clear and high, like the crying of a far-off bird.

"Pe-ter!"

There was a crash as a tool dropped to the ground.

"Pe-ter!" the cry came again, louder this time; and again, with a sob between the words, "Oh—*Peter*!"

A despairing shout, so hoarse with terror that it startled even David, burst from the gloom beyond the mounds. In the next instant the stranger was running, stumbling, panting, swearing, as he fled from his guilt.

The silence gave place to pandemonium.

David, Johnson, and Colonel Wetherall sprang in pursuit; Jill and the vicar, following their instructions, trained torch beams on the flying figures. But the fugitive was nimble, and he appeared to know his way better than the others. Moreover, the whole pack of hunters and hunted was soon out of range of the light, with nothing much to guide them. They were making too much noise themselves, particularly the colonel, to be able to hear the footsteps of the quarry.

Jill and Mr. Symonds moved slowly after them, not very sure how to help, and both hoping to miss the capture. But shortly afterwards a blood-curdling yell made Jill seize the vicar's arm, while he stopped and even drew back a little towards the barrows.

"They've got him," said Jill, in a shrinking voice.

"I'm afraid not," said the vicar, whose ears were keen. "I'm

afraid the detective has only got Colonel Wetherall. Poor John, his second mishap tonight! He will be so upset."

As the colonel, only slightly winded, was by now rising to his feet, and displaying his remarkable virtuosity of speech, Jill was ready to agree with Mr. Symonds. They were all too preoccupied to hear the splutter and roar of the motor-bike starting up—all except David, who had been ahead of the others.

Chief-Inspector Johnson, much mortified, bent to the storm. The arrival of Jill and Mr. Symonds started its decline, and presently David, coming panting back up the path, brought it to an end.

"Got away, I'm afraid," he said. "Listen. That's his bike in the village now. But I've won something. I found it on the path."

He flourished an old green deer-stalker hat.

"I've been waiting for this to turn up," said Johnson, taking it in his hand.

"Part of the burglary at Boxwood."

"Part of the fake job there. This proves it."

"Why? I should have thought not. In the sense you mean."

They moved back to the barrows, Johnson walking ahead, alone, the colonel, limping slightly, in the rear. Johnson's torch was directed to the ground. He stopped short at the first barrow.

"Don't come any closer, Mrs. Wintringham," he ordered sternly.

"Then it is— You have found—"

David went on to join the inspector. The others waited. They could see, in the light of Johnson's torch, a bundle lying on the ground, and they had no wish to look at what it contained. It was enough to watch the change on the faces of the two men.

"A single blow, but a savage one," said David. "The bone is split for three inches and splintered besides. You should be able to identify without too much trouble."

"Is it—" Jill said, and hesitated. "Is it—what you expected?"

"Yes," said Inspector Johnson. "It is what we hoped. And taken together with the hat he dropped, and this paper in the wrappings, I have no doubt we know who did it."

"You don't mean Hilton, do you?" said David, sharply.

"I do mean Hilton. And I mean to act."

"You can act, if you feel you must," said David. "It might be the best thing to do in the circumstances. But Hilton didn't kill

his wife. Tonight has proved, if we needed proof, that whoever murdered Felicity Hilton, her husband was not the man."

III

A dead silence followed David's assertion, then Johnson said curtly: "We're wasting time. I must get back to the White Hart and send out a general call. You approve, Colonel?"

"Let's hear what Dr. Wintringham has to say," said the chief constable. Having been the victim of a very painful mistake on the part of Scotland Yard, he was feeling distinctly cold towards the inspector.

"Only this," said David. "I happen to know that Hilton has a diseased heart. For years he has never moved at a faster rate than a moderate walk. If he had gone off in a sprint like the one we saw, or rather heard, just now, it is doubtful if he would have got as far down the path as his motor-bike. He would almost certainly have given up before he got away on it. Therefore it was not Hilton, but the shadowy customer we have been trying to catch up on from the start. And were never nearer to it than tonight. Moreover, he answers to the name of Peter. Jill scared the daylights out of him with her performance of Felicity's ghost."

"I think a good many of my parishioners would be scared of something they believed to be supernatural, guilt or no guilt," said the vicar, mildly. "But of course the head lies there: you have proved the guilt."

"If you say Hilton's heart is bad, I'll have to take it as true," said Johnson, unwillingly. "But I'm not convinced he couldn't run, a short way, anyhow. The man is no invalid. He comes down here to Duckington, and thinks nothing of spending a day digging up prehistoric remains. I'm going straight back now. And I'd like a warrant, sir, if you agree."

"I agree with Dr. Wintringham," said the colonel stubbornly. "Go down to the White Hart and see what Hilton has been doing all afternoon and evening, since he got back from Flitton. If the man has not gone, and has a proper alibi, you'd better wait until you get back to London, and Hilton to Boxwood, before you start talking about warrants."

“Very good, sir,” said Chief-Inspector Johnson. He picked up the grisly parcel, still lying at his feet, and walked rapidly away into the distance.

“Will he really go to the White Hart?” said Jill anxiously. David understood the thought in her mind.

“Police station first, probably. If he tries to get Hilton to identify that head in its present condition, he’ll most likely kill the man,” he said. “We’d better go down there ourselves as quickly as possible. But I think Johnson only wanted to go there because it is the nearest place to phone from, nearer than the police station, and he wants to put out his call to pick up the motor-bike, if it left Duckington.”

“I shall go straight home,” said Mr. Symonds. “I can be of no use now, and I have not got your hardened nerves. I feel sickened by the whole ghastly business. Are you coming with me, John?”

Colonel Wetherall shook his head.

“No, Francis. I’m going to the White Hart. I want to see this fellow Hilton, if he’s still there. That damned detective isn’t going to bully anyone in the neighbourhood if I can help it. Clumsy—”

David and Jill walked on ahead down the path, the others following; a progress marked by short bursts of profanity from the colonel whenever the uneven ground jolted the leg that had suffered in his two encounters.

At the road they parted: Mr. Symonds went on down the main road to the vicarage near the church, while the other three crossed to a lane leading to the back of the White Hart.

There they hurried into the saloon bar. It was two minutes to closing time. Jill and the colonel sat down while David went up to the bar. While he was paying for the drinks he said casually to the barmaid, “I think a friend of mine is staying here. A Mr. Hilton.”

“Yes, sir,” the girl answered readily. “But I don’t know if he’s in. He’s been out most of the day.”

“Do you happen to know if he is staying overnight, or going back to London?”

“I don’t, sir. But I could ask Mrs. Norbury.”

“I’ll go round and ask her myself,” said David. He left a tip on the counter and carried the drinks back to the others, intending

to finish his own quickly and then to find the proprietress in her office in the residential part of the hotel.

But he was forestalled by the arrival in the saloon bar of Mrs. Norbury herself, looking for Colonel Wetherall. She saw him at once, and hurried towards the table where all three were sitting.

"You are wanted on the phone, Colonel Wetherall," she said breathlessly. "It's Mr. Symonds, and he says it's very important."

While the colonel hurried away, David introduced himself and Jill as friends of both the vicar and Mr. Hilton.

"We have been up on the downs with Mr. Symonds," said Jill in her cool voice. "We had a long walk up there. We thought we would like to call here on our way back to—"

She stopped. It might offend Mrs. Norbury to know that they were staying at the Royal Arms. But the latter had not listened to her last sentence.

"On the downs," she said. "There now! I wonder you didn't meet him. He went up there for a walk himself."

"When?" said David harshly. Mrs. Norbury turned to look at him, and it seemed to both Jill and David that her eyes took on a wary look.

"Just after dinner," she said, and added, "He's been back this last half-hour or so."

"Where is he?" asked David quietly.

"Well," Mrs. Norbury answered. "I think he's in his room. He hasn't been well lately, and—"

"If he wasn't well," said David, "surely, after his day with the archaeological types, it was a bit unwise to go out again?"

Mrs. Norbury made no answer to this.

"If you'll come with me," she said, "I'll show you the way to his room."

Her cheeks were unusually pink as she knocked at Mr. Hilton's door, and pinker still when he opened it a few seconds later.

"Some friends of yours," she said. "They've been walking on the down. I told them you'd been up there, too, this evening."

"Up— Oh, yes, I was up there too," said Alastair Hilton.

When David had explained the situation he said, "So now you know what happened, would you care to tell me where you really were tonight between eight and ten-fifteen?"

"No," said Hilton quietly. "Not until I've thought it over."

"For God's sake don't say a damned silly thing like that to

Inspector Johnson! He's got it in for you already. In addition to the—main exhibit—there's a hat of yours, found on the path, and some pages of that archaeological magazine you take. Both, I think, rather crude plants. Nobody in their senses would wear a deerstalker on a motor-bike, but Johnson may not look at it that way. On the other hand it explains your burglary. The murderer wanted something of yours to leave at or near the barrow to lead the trail there. No doubt he would have done something to promote another dig. In his curiously haphazard way he is drawing a net round you, Hilton. And you've got to break out before the police close it on you, and let him escape. So come along! Out with it! Where were you?"

"He won't say," said Jill, forestalling Hilton's refusal. "But it doesn't matter, because I think I know. And I know how to find out, too."

Before David could ask her what she meant there was another knock at the door. Jill went to open it. The new visitor turned out to be Colonel Wetherall. He wanted to speak to Mr. Hilton.

"You here!" the colonel said, with some disgust, seeing David.

"Sorry, sir, yes. This is Mr. Hilton and—hullo, where's Jill?"

"She went out of the door as I came in. Didn't you notice?"

"No. As a matter of fact I wasn't watching her."

He had been looking at Alastair Hilton, but he did not see any necessity to say so.

"Damned if I can see any sense in your profession mixing itself up in affairs of this sort," said the colonel. "And I know bloody well I wouldn't let *my* wife take a hand in them too."

"Times change," said David, mildly. "But I agree that my two professions do sometimes appear to clash."

"You, sir!" said the colonel to Hilton. "That insufferable chap from Scotland Yard has the impudence to suggest you killed your wife. Not true, is it?"

"No," said Hilton.

"Glad to hear it. Never thought his story held water. Been over at Symonds' place. Might have settled this business sooner if I'd known before, but the message came after we left."

"May I know what message?" asked David.

"From Joe at the Royal Arms." He turned back to Hilton. "You stay where you are, sir, whatever happens. Your medical friend here can be responsible for you. Eh, Wintringham? See he

doesn't leave this room till I come back. Got that?"

"Yes," said David. "I'm sure neither of us wishes to move at present."

"Don't care what you wish. It's an order, if you don't want to find yourselves in cells before morning."

Colonel Wetherall closed the door behind him, and they heard him stumping off along the passage.

"I don't understand a word that man said," complained Hilton. "Who is Joe and what does he signify?"

"Joe is a barman at the Royal Arms, who has a friend called Daisy employed here," said David. "I think you know Daisy. I hope I am right in what I think Joe signifies, but I'd rather leave it to the colonel to explain to you."

"In the meantime," said Hilton, "we may as well sit down and be comfortable."

They were not to rest for long, however. Voices in the corridor died away at Hilton's door, and it was opened, without knocking, by Chief-Inspector Johnson, followed by two uniformed policemen.

"Alastair Hilton," began Johnson, but he was interrupted by the arrival of Jill and Mrs. Norbury, who burst into the room together.

"Keep those women out!" said Johnson, furiously, to his assistants.

"You stand out of my way, Frank Parker," said Mrs. Norbury, and was not impeded. She walked firmly to Mr. Hilton's side. "Now," she said, "what's the meaning of this disturbance in my hotel, and after closing time, too?"

"I am a police officer," began Johnson, but he got no further.

"I wouldn't care if you were twenty police officers," Mrs. Norbury assured him. "What do you mean, breaking into a guest's room on false pretences?"

"Obstructing an officer of the law in his duty is an offence," said Johnson. "I am not going to explain my business to you. I am here to make an arrest."

"Oh, no, you aren't," said Mrs. Norbury. "And I don't want your explanations. Mrs. Wintringham has given me the gen on your little performance up on the down tonight. I know what you think and I know you're wrong. Because Mr. Hilton wasn't outside the White Hart all the evening, and I'm ready to swear

that in a court of law."

"But you said—" began David, and stopped.

"He confessed to being out and had no alibi?" said Johnson. "Exactly what I thought."

"Both Hilton and Mrs. Norbury said he was out," agreed David, "but I didn't believe them."

"We told a lie," said Mrs. Norbury. "He did it because I had, and he thought I didn't want the truth spread about. As if I should mind, if it was something important. He was in my private sitting room downstairs, if you want to know. He was telling me the whole story, of his wife's disappearance, and what Dr. Wintringham has found out about it."

She implied that the police had been perfectly helpless in the matter.

"Now look here, Mrs. Norbury," said the chief-inspector sternly. "I've been very patient with you, but I'm not going to be turned from my duty by a story invented for the occasion."

"Oh, but it wasn't," said Jill. "Was it, Daisy?"

She stood aside to disclose the shrinking chambermaid, who would have fled if Jill had not held her firmly by the arm.

"Tell the inspector, Daisy."

"What'll I tell him?"

"What you told me."

"Mrs. Norbury'll give me the sack."

"You'll have to take a chance on that. Or Mr. Hilton may be arrested wrongly."

"I wouldn't care. He made trouble for me last time he come here."

Johnson turned to the girl.

"Come here, Daisy," he said.

She approached on unwilling feet.

"Has Mrs. Wintringham told you what to say to me?"

"No. I wouldn't never have told her if I'd known she was bringing me up here."

"Did Mrs. Norbury tell you what to say?"

"I should think not! She doesn't know. She'll give me my cards when she does."

"Go on, then."

"I heard voices in Mrs. Norbury's room, and there's a little window high up on the wall of it, near the staircase; sort of a

ventilation. So I looked in, and Mr. Hilton was there, and Mrs. Norbury was sitting close up to him, and she had her hand on his knee and—"

"You young liar!" cried Mrs. Norbury, with a scarlet face. "There's not a word of truth in it!"

"Not a word?" said Inspector Johnson.

"Beyond what I told you before, that Mr. Hilton couldn't have been up the down because he was talking to me in my sitting-room."

Chief-Inspector Johnson was visibly shaken by this evidence, the truth of which was quite apparent. But he had not acted without reason, and he rallied himself in support of what he knew. Moving forward so that he stood between Hilton and his friends, he said slowly, "Have you now, or have you ever had, a motorcycle, B.S.A., 1947 model?"

"Yes," said Hilton, surprisingly. "Yes. I had one at the end of the war, to save petrol, when it was rationed. But I sold it a couple of years ago."

"Who to?"

"To my garage. Billings Garage, in Boxwood. I think one of their mechanics bought it. But they would know. I turned it in as part payment for a new car, the one I drive now."

"That can be checked, as you say. Perhaps you borrowed the bike back from the mechanic now and then?"

"No, I have never done so."

"You had it here in Duckington tonight."

"How could I? When could I have brought it here? I came in my car. I can account for my whole time here."

"You took twice the normal time to get down here." He swung round on Mrs. Norbury. "You didn't know that, did you?"

"Yes, I did," she answered with spirit. "He told me what time he left London, and I remarked at the time to Norah that it was slow going. But he didn't try to hide it."

"I took a long time, because I was not feeling too good, and stopped several times for a rest on the way," said Hilton.

"You drove that bike up the down tonight," said Johnson.

"I did not."

"Then why was it found not two hundred yards from the beginning of the track up the hill, with the licence and number plates gone, and the engine number scratched over? Tell me

that, Mr. Hilton? Or rather, tell it to Scotland Yard, where we're going now."

"It is not my bike, and I know nothing about it," repeated Hilton. "I will go with you, if I must, but what these others have said is the truth."

"Hadn't you better check up on the bike before you make up your mind?" said David. "There must be more than one B. S.A. '47 about. It seems to me the bird we want has left Duckington. Hitch-hiking, probably. He wouldn't risk staying here. He's gone, after a very ill advised final effort to pin suspicion on Hilton."

"Final?" asked Hilton.

"Your hat, your magazine, the bundle—"

He stopped abruptly. The bundle containing something Hilton would have to identify: or could he spare him that? The sight might kill him.

Inspector Johnson was not so considerate. He told Hilton in plain words what had been left near the barrow, and in the latter's stricken face and extreme pallor saw only a further confirmation of his own theory. He warned Hilton that he would be expected to view all the relics at Scotland Yard in the near future. David felt called upon to protest.

"I shall dispute the necessity for that," he said. "As Mr. Hilton's medical adviser I am prepared to give him a certificate saying it would be dangerous for him to do so. In fact," he went on, feeling for Hilton's pulse and looking at his drawn face, "you have given him about as much as he can stand tonight. If you insist on taking him to London now, you'd better call an ambulance. You're not likely to get him there in any other way."

Inspector Johnson, who was a humane man at heart, began to look for a way out of his dilemma that would not lower his prestige too rudely in the eyes of the local force, nor give Hilton, if he were really guilty, a chance of escape. While the little group stood silent and uncertain, a bell downstairs rang loudly.

"I'm wanted," said Mrs. Norbury. "Don't let them bully him, Doctor."

She swept towards the door, which one of the policemen held open for her. Mr. Hilton struggled to his feet.

"I'd better go with you, Inspector," he said. "I'd rather leave here. I've brought enough trouble on this house already, if not scandal. The news will be all over the village before morning."

His eyes were on Daisy as he spoke.

"Not from me," she said, almost crying with remorse. "I wouldn't say a word. I don't want to leave the place; I don't, really. Mrs. Norbury'll never keep me now."

"That's silly," said Jill, patting her shoulder. "Don't you see, Mrs. Norbury is very grateful to you for proving to Inspector Johnson that she spoke the truth. As for scandal," she went on, turning to Hilton, "no one in their senses could make a scandal of your telling Mrs. Norbury about your troubles; she is a very —"

She was interrupted by a voice on the stairs, unmistakably Colonel Wetherall's.

"Here he comes," said David. "Now we are getting somewhere, I think."

There was a slight scuffle at the door, then the colonel's order: "Yes, go in, Mrs. Norbury. Ladies first, even in emergencies. Now you, Joe. I'll bring up the rear, to prevent stragglers, eh?"

Mrs. Norbury crossed the room quickly to Hilton's side; evidently she wanted to dissociate herself from the colonel's action. Joe shuffled to one side of the door and stood with his back against the wall of the room. He was joined there by Daisy, who slipped her hand into his.

"Go ahead, Joe," said the colonel. "Tell Chief-Inspector Johnson what you told me."

In a low and hesitant voice Joe described the arrival of the motor cyclist at the Royal Arms that evening. He told also of the man's visit and the reports of the various villagers who had seen him on the downs on that earlier occasion.

"You say you sent a message to the vicarage this evening?" said Johnson.

"Mrs. Symonds agrees with that," said the colonel. "And she noticed the time it came through."

"Why didn't you contact the police?" asked the inspector.

"I didn't know it was a police job."

This seemed fair enough, in the circumstances.

"You say you recognized this man tonight, after an interval of some months. Are you certain of that?"

"Sure as I'm standing here."

"You would know him again?"

"Yes, I would."

“Take a look round this room,” said Johnson. “Is there anyone here you recognize?”

“I knows Mrs. Norbury,” began Joe, shyly. “And of course, Daisy here. And Colonel Wetherall, and Frank Parker and Mr. Small.”

“You can miss out the police and the local inhabitants.”

“Well, this lady and gentleman are staying at the Arms tonight. I recognizes them,” said Joe, indicating David and Jill. “And that only leaves you, sir, and Mr. Hilton over there.”

“You know Mr. Hilton, do you?” said Johnson, not at all pleased.

“Of course I knows Mr. Hilton. He’s been down here a good few times, and then we all knows as he’s interested in these here old remains, like Vicar, and then there was the talk a while back —”

“Never mind that. When did you last see Mr. Hilton?”

“I don’t recollect the date. When he come here in the spring to dig.”

“You did not see him today?”

“No, sir.”

“You did not serve him with a drink at the Royal Arms, when he went there tonight on a motorcycle?”

“Mr. Hilton? On a motorcycle! You don’t mean the chap I was talking of just now? That’s not Mr. Hilton. For why should I ring up Vicar if it’d only been Mr. Hilton? You’re mixing them up, sir, if you’ll pardon my saying so. Mr. Hilton is quite a different gentleman.”

“Thank you, Joe,” said Alastair Hilton.

IV

Janet Lapthorn had quite given up hope of the police ever tracing her missing friend, and though she often spoke to her husband of their amazing slackness, and lost no opportunity in public of running them down, she had really become rather tired of the whole business. She was inclined to accept the explanation Jack had given her in the beginning. Felicity had gone off with her Peter, and intended to sever all ties with her former life.

It came as a shock therefore when, in the middle of June, she received another letter from Alastair Hilton himself. It came as an added shock that he said he had news of Felicity, but could not bring himself to write it down. He asked her to go to Boxwood as soon as possible. He needed her help.

"Whatever does that mean?" asked Janet, handing the letter to her husband.

"How should I know? But you'd better go, hadn't you?"

"Had I? Would it be safe?"

"Why not?"

"After what I've been thinking about him."

"Your thoughts are unlikely to have reached him. And nobody but yourself could have taken them seriously."

"You always make fun of anything I say, don't you? Anyone would think you considered your wife a congenital idiot."

"Not as bad as that," Jack Lapthorn murmured. "Only a little bit wanting."

"You wait," she threatened him, half seriously. "The worm will turn one of these days."

"Which day are you going to Boxwood?" he asked. He was growing tired of badinage that missed the undercurrent of real affection to sustain it.

"No time like the present. I'll go today, if he's going to be there."

She rang up the Willows, and was answered by Mrs. Mason. Yes, Mr. Hilton would be pleased to see her any time she liked to come. He was not going up to business at all that week. No, he was not ill. He had been away for a few days the week before, and now he was taking the rest of the present week off.

"I thought he was supposed to be a businessman," said Janet, going back to her husband with the news.

"He is his own master," said Jack. "And he has a very reliable managing clerk. Unlike me, worst luck! I must be off, or I shall be late."

Janet Lapthorn spent the morning doing her usual work in the house, buying stores, and arranging an evening meal that would be easy to cook when she came back from Boxwood. She left it all set out ready on the kitchen table, and took a late morning train into London. As she had to cross the town from Liverpool Street to Waterloo, and preferred to do it above ground, she

decided to take a bus to the Strand and find some lunch there before continuing her journey. The housekeeper had not passed on any invitation to a meal.

Mrs. Lapthorn reached the Willows at a little after half-past two. She was shown into the sitting-room, through the windows of which she saw Alastair Hilton with two strangers all sitting in deck chairs under a tree on the lawn. From inside the room she watched Mrs. Mason walk across the grass to the group, and walk back.

"Very formal, all of a sudden," she said to herself, beginning to feel uncomfortable.

Mrs. Mason came back to her.

"Will you join them in the garden?" she said. "I'll show you the way."

"I know the way," said Janet, tartly. "When Felicity—Mrs. Hilton—was here, and we lived in Boxwood, there was hardly a day passed without my seeing her. But you wouldn't remember. You only came here after we left, if I remember rightly."

Mrs. Mason, paying no attention to this petulance, which followed her down the passage to the garden door, stood aside as she reached it and, after Mrs. Lapthorn had passed through, closed it behind her.

The men rose from their chairs as Janet drew near, but Hilton did not advance to meet her. He was much thinner than she remembered him, and very much paler, unless that was the effect of the shade under the tree.

"I am glad you have come, Janet," Hilton said, taking her outstretched hand. "I was afraid you might still be angry with me for keeping you in ignorance of Felicity's whereabouts. But you see, at the time, I knew so little, and I thought I was being loyal to her."

Mrs. Lapthorn listened to this, feeling the strangers' eyes were upon her. She fidgeted uncomfortably, and did not attempt to answer him.

"You must introduce me to your friends," she said, with an embarrassed laugh.

Hilton did so, and then she was provided with a chair, and they all sat down. Hilton lost no time in telling her that an investigation had proved beyond all reasonable doubt that Felicity had been murdered, and her body disposed of in a

particularly horrible manner.

Janet took it more calmly than her audience had feared she would. But she had for a long time accustomed herself to the idea of Felicity's death, and in any case her agitation had been caused more by the existence of an unsolved problem than by any real concern for Mrs. Hilton. Whatever her protestations, she was not a woman capable of any deep feeling, as her unfortunate husband was only too aware. So now, though she lay back and shut her eyes and clasped her hands tightly together in her lap, and presently provided a few tears for her handkerchief to dab away, her colour did not change, and her breathing remained slow and even.

Hilton, on the other hand, was exhausted by the recital of the tragedy. Only a week had passed since his worst fears were realized, and now that he knew everything, except the identity of the murderer, and the circumstances of the man's life with Felicity, he understood how narrow must have been the margin for his dead wife between the safety of her home and a sordid death. If she had made up her mind a fortnight, even a week, earlier she would be here now, discontented perhaps, as she had so often been, but living, beautiful—

"You should have let me give Mrs. Lapthorn the facts," said David, in a low voice. "Shall I get your pills?"

"No. They're in my pocket. But I'm all right, really."

"As you have just been hearing," said David to Janet Lapthorn, "Mrs. Hilton took two suitcases away with her. They were old ones that have been in the family for a good many years, and neither of them had her initials on. One had no initials at all, and the other those of Hilton's aunt. The police have worked on a description of the cases, but have not found them so far. They do not seem to be at any guest house or hotel in either the Golders Green or Battersea areas. There may be several reasons for that. The police may not have asked at the right house, or the landlady may have sold the cases, or their contents, or both, or she may be holding them as security for rent owing, in case Mrs. Hilton or her supposed husband turns up again. I advertised in the hope of finding something of this sort, but so far without results."

"We think you could help us," said Jill, "in the matter of the clothes. I mean, you probably know in more detail than Mr.

Hilton, what clothes she had with her. Besides, you saw any new ones she bought after she left Boxwood."

"She had no new things after she left Boxwood," said Janet Lapthorn. "In fact, she seemed to have fewer and fewer of her old ones as time went on. I used to ask her about it, and blame her for not taking enough trouble with her appearance. She said she couldn't afford it."

Janet shot a spiteful glance at Mr. Hilton.

"She was getting ten pounds a week from me," he answered the look. Mrs. Lapthorn lowered her eyes.

"She ought to have managed on that with enough for everything. She never told me what you gave her."

"Generous for the needs of one," said David. "Barely enough for two. You should have given less, Hilton. There would have been less temptation."

"How was I to know?" he said in a low voice. "You think she was keeping the swine as well? On my money?"

"That suggests itself, I think. We have discovered no motive up to now. It is significant that she was killed about the time she decided to leave him."

"This business of the clothes," said Jill to Mrs. Lapthorn. "Shall we make a list of everything you remember? The police have been combing the pawnbrokers and secondhand clothes shops in Battersea and Lambeth and Golders Green, but they haven't found anything. Mr. Hilton is so vague, even about her jewellery."

"She had a good deal of that," said Janet readily. "Nothing very valuable, you know. She had a good string of cultured pearls, worth about twenty pounds, and one or two brooches in old-fashioned settings she took to wearing as costume jewellery when it got fashionable. The rest was showy, but decidedly cheap."

"We'd better write them down," said Jill. "Shall we go into the house? It will be easier, and Mr. Hilton won't have to hear you describing it all."

Mrs. Mason brought out a table under the tree at half-past four and followed it with the tea-tray. Jill and Janet Lapthorn, their task completed as far as the latter's memory would go, rejoined

the men. After they had all finished their leisurely meal, the Wintringhams got up to go, suggesting that Mrs. Lapthorn might like to join them.

"But I've got a return ticket on the railway," she said, as if she meant to use it at all costs.

"So have we."

"Oh, I thought you must have come down by car."

"Not today," said David, giving Jill a warning glance. "We rather like the train to this place. By car it means heavy traffic practically the whole way."

Mrs. Lapthorn was prepared to be gracious. She was not particularly taken with the pair: they seemed to her to have a set of personal jokes that were meaningless to her, though Alastair understood them all right. Dr. Wintringham, too, wasn't a proper doctor. He only did research work at one of the big London hospitals. Perhaps that was why he spoke to her in a cold, expressionless voice, without any of the little compliments and insinuations Jack's friends used. But she had no objection to travelling with them. Any company on a railway journey was better than none. It always bothered her to be in a train alone. You heard of such awful things happening to women passengers. And then to be alone in an accident: What could be worse than that?

They got into one of the new carriages on the southern suburban lines; a coach with a corridor down the centre and bays of seats on either side, with small luggage racks above. Mrs. Lapthorn and the Wintringhams sat down; the former next to Jill on one side, David, alone, opposite the two women. The seat at David's side was empty. Just before the train started a girl came quickly along the platform looking into the carriages. When the whistle blew she pulled open the door at the end of the coach and got in. The train started. The girl swayed up the centre of the coach, and failing to see an empty seat on the other side of it, she took the vacant place next to David.

Mrs. Lapthorn and Jill were watching the platform as the train drew out. In fact the former continued to stare out the window at the fields and hedges. The girl beside David took some knitting out of the bag she carried and then got up to put the

bag on the rack. After that she settled herself and began to knit.

It was at this moment that Janet Lapthorn, perhaps drawn by the noise the newcomer made, looked round, and an instant later grasped Jill by the arm. The girl's head was bent, counting stitches, but soon she looked up. Janet Lapthorn was again staring out the window. David and Jill exchanged glances.

Nothing further happened until the train reached Surbiton, but here a large number of people got out and a few got in. In the noise and confusion Janet said in Jill's ear, "That girl is wearing *Felicity's brooch*!"

Jill instantly dismissed the idea as absurd. Such a coincidence was too wild. The afternoon's work had addled Mrs. Lapthorn's brain. She forced a polite smile, murmuring, "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Come to the end of the coach. I'll tell you."

Signalling to David to stay where he was, Jill got up and, followed by Mrs. Lapthorn, made her way to the end of the coach, where she stood near the window, looking out.

"It is one of the brooches I was telling you about," said Mrs. Lapthorn. "Genuine small pearls in an old-fashioned gold setting. It doesn't look so very different to the imitation dress stuff they sell so much of, but I know that pattern. You won't find exactly that in the shops. I'm ready to swear it's Felicity's. What's more, I know that girl's face. She works in Boxwood at the hairdresser I used to go to. Felicity went there, too. She hasn't recognized me, but she would if I spoke to her."

"Do you think Mrs. Hilton gave the girl the brooch?"

"I suppose it's possible. Oughtn't we to find out?"

"Yes, we certainly ought. If she really is the girl you remember it wouldn't be such a coincidence meeting her. Particularly if she travels from Boxwood on this train every day of the week."

"Very likely she does. She wasn't a Boxwood girl, I know."

"We must tell David," said Jill. "I feel all confused. I'll get him over here."

David, seemingly deep in his own thoughts, had been watching the excited conversation between the two women, and it did not need much effort on Jill's part to bring him to their side.

"We'll get out of this carriage at Wimbledon," he said. "If she stays on, we'll get back into the next one. We'll have to be pretty

snappy at Waterloo not to miss her."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mrs. Lapthorn. "I'm afraid I shall have to leave you at Waterloo. I must go straight to Liverpool Street on the Underground."

"Oh, no!" said Jill. "You can't do that! You must come with us. We shall want you to identify the brooch."

"I wouldn't dream of accosting anyone," said Mrs. Lapthorn firmly.

"We'll do the accosting. You'll only have to say what you think about the brooch."

"I certainly shan't. If the police get hold of it and I am asked to give my opinion at Scotland Yard, in private, I might consider it. Not otherwise. I wouldn't have spoken if I'd known how you would take it."

"But you are *sure, quite* sure, it is Mrs. Hilton's?"

"It is a most unusual pattern. I have never seen it on any other brooch. I always thought it very original when Felicity wore it."

"Then why not back us up straight away?"

"No, thank you. Besides, I have my husband's dinner to get. And I shall be nearly an hour late as it is."

So at Waterloo Mrs. Lapthorn disappeared at once into the Underground for Bank station, using the stairs from the middle of the platform, while David and Jill, dodging through the crowds, followed their quarry to the barrier. Here in the throng David managed to jolt the girl's arm as she held out her season ticket. It slipped from her hand and he dived quickly after it, nearly losing his balance as the people behind him pressed forward.

He restored the ticket in its holder to the girl, with an earnest apology that brought a reluctant smile to her lips.

"The name is Shirley Gardiner," said David in Jill's ear, as they hurried along in pursuit.

Miss Gardiner floated down the first escalator six heads away from them, and she passed the next barrier by means of her season ticket, while they were frantically searching for coins at the automatic machine.

"Tottenham Court Road," said David. "Or so her season says. Pray God she's going there."

She was still in sight as they got on to the second escalator, and in the press of the crowds moving against her at its foot

they caught her up again. They travelled to Tottenham Court Road in the seats next to hers.

From there the chase was severe, but short. Three times they lost sight of her before she turned down a side street and proceeded along it to a large building, which they knew to be a girls' hostel. This she entered, leaving them standing on the pavement outside.

"Now does she live there, or has she only come to visit a friend?" said David. "She lives somewhere in the neighbourhood, or she wouldn't have a season to Tottenham Court Road. You stay here, and if she comes out again hold her by any means you can think of until I come back. I must get Johnson. I'm out of my depth."

"I shall be accosted," said Jill. "By strange men. Foreigners."

"I should be warned off by the police if I waited exactly at the entrance to this highly respectable establishment. I won't be long. Then we can wait together."

But Chief-Inspector Johnson did not approve of their plan, and presently the Wintringhams were both seated in his office at Scotland Yard.

"No good confronting that girl tonight," said the inspector. "She wouldn't say a thing at the time, and then she'd warn whoever gave her or sold her the brooch. We don't want her; we want to find out where she got it. The Lapthorn woman recognized it: she'll have to go down to Boxwood with me tomorrow. Did you say she knew where the girl works?"

"One of the hairdressers, she said."

"Perhaps she knows the name. I'll ask her."

The inspector got through to the Lapthorns' house: Jack Lapthorn answered the call. His wife had not arrived yet, he said. When he was told who was speaking to him his voice cracked on a high note of astonishment before returning to its normal tone.

"Is it about Felicity—Mrs. Hilton? Janet was full of some wild tale this morning—"

"It has to do with her experiences today. Ask her to ring me as soon as she comes in."

"We'll have to do it the long way," said the inspector. "The shops will all be closed now, of course. Directories might help. In any case, we don't want to upset that girl until we have her

where she can't do any harm."

"You don't mean lock her up, do you?" said David. "Habeas corpus—"

"No, I don't," said Johnson, with contempt. "I mean at her work. Mrs. Lapthorn will have to come to Boxwood with me tomorrow, but I wouldn't trust her to set the ball rolling. Mrs. Wintringham had better be the one to have her hair washed by Shirley."

"What if she isn't wearing the brooch tomorrow?" said Jill. "Or got it at Woolworth's?"

"You know she didn't," said David. "We saw it quite close in the Tube and it looked genuine enough. But it seems a very long shot, all the same."

"Not much longer than some we've made already," said Johnson.

V

The next morning, however, all Johnson's careful plans to avoid alarming Shirley Gardiner were completely upset by the morning papers.

For Duckington had broken out the day before in a big way, and London had copied Duckington. And now reporters were invading the White Hart and the Royal Arms, the vicarage, and the Willows at Boxwood.

Inspector Johnson blamed himself, but too late. He had reckoned without Daisy's volatile imagination and too abundant spite. From being against Hilton, she had, on the night of her ordeal in his room at the White Hart, turned all her energies into an attack on the police. With Joe's help she had found a representative of the local press and poured out her story of the persecution of a sick man, and the terrible position he had been placed in by the mistakes of Scotland Yard.

More worldly-wise than Daisy, and also more cautious, the local paper had interviewed Mrs. Norbury. There they found a more coherent story, but the persecution theme was upheld. The victim had not been arrested, had indeed gone back to his own home. As for the true facts of that Saturday night's work on the downs, the vicar and the chief constable knew all about it.

Mr. Symonds proved to be a model of discretion, but Colonel Wetherall, smarting from various injuries, real and imagined, at the hands of those he considered his inferiors, issued, without consulting Scotland Yard, a carefully worded story of a particularly sensational crime, in so far at least as it concerned Duckington. The human bones found at the prehistoric site had been identified, the papers said, as part of the remains of a Mrs. Felicity Hilton, of the Willows, Grange Road, Boxwood. Investigations were continuing.

"At full blast, and from all sides," said Johnson to David, who had been hurriedly summoned at eight o' clock in the morning to Scotland Yard. "I'll have to go down at once. No good trying to hide everything now. The best we can do is to seem to be closing in on Hilton. That might reassure the man we really want. If that girl, Gardiner, is completely innocent, we have a chance. If not, from the moment we contact her, the real criminal will be off again".

"But I don't think he has been running away at all," said David. "Except last Saturday night. I don't mind betting he is behaving as normally as possible this week. It is the only thing he could do. We know that he lives, or else works, in Boxwood. Miss Gardiner should be able to tell you which, and how she met him, and his real name, provided she knows him by it."

"I'm going down at once," said Johnson. "I shall simply have to pull the girl in and make her talk, and take her round to Hilton, if she doesn't object, to get the brooch identified. Mrs. Lapthorn is waiting to go down with me."

"In the meantime," said David. "I must get on to St. Edmund's. Jill was much relieved you didn't want her in Boxwood. She was dreading it. Not because of what she had to do so much as at the thought of having her hair washed by a strange shop. Let me know at the Medical School when you have got the dope from Shirley G."

"I will," said Johnson. Just as David was leaving he added: "That motor-bike wasn't Hilton's. His is still in Boxwood at that garage he goes to."

"I'm glad to hear it," said David. "It might have taken us off on a tiresome false trail."

"Why don't you name me?" Johnson grinned at him. "I'm converted, you know, Doctor. Hilton is in the clear as far as I'm

concerned."

"Poor devil. I don't suppose he cares much either way."

Johnson drove down to Boxwood in a police car, sitting beside the driver, with Janet Lapthorn alone on the back seat. David went to St. Edmund's Hospital, where he spent the morning at his usual work in his department and in the wards. As far as possible he put the Hilton case from his mind. But below the surface its main problems nagged at his intelligence. The scattered threads had drawn together, but they seemed more like the hard core of disorder in Jill's knitting bag than a neatly made-up skein of reasoning. And there were gaps, large gaps, even in the story of events.

At eleven he went with some of his colleagues to have coffee in the refectory of the Medical School. While he sat, hardly taking in what they said, a messenger came to tell him he was wanted on the outside line. David left his coffee, and hurried away.

The call was from Johnson and he had news. He had found the girl, Shirley Gardiner, at the hairdresser's shop to which Mrs. Lapthorn had directed the police car. He had spoken to her employer at once, explaining that his inquiries were necessary, but only involved the girl indirectly. Shirley was asked to see him in the room behind the shop.

"She tried to hold out at first, but not for long," Johnson reported. "I told her enough to make her see sense. The brooch was given her as a present a couple of months ago by her boy friend. She called him Eric Ford."

"Isn't that his name?"

"Could be. Or could not. She always goes home to London, to the hostel, I mean, by the 5.45 train you caught yesterday. You were right about that. She met Eric Ford on the train. She says she knows he works in Boxwood, but she doesn't know where. A white-collar job, anyway. She tried to ask him once or twice but he didn't tell her. On the other hand he always goes up on that train, or nearly always. She was surprised he wasn't on it yesterday."

"Almost as if he knew I was going to be on it," said David.

"So likely."

"If he's the man I think he is, it would be quite likely."

"And that Shirley would sit down next to you?"

"That was luck, but not so extraordinary. There were very few passengers waiting besides ourselves, and we and this girl all got into the central coach, the new open kind with nice new upholstery. As it was moderately full already we sat in an empty bay, all together."

"Well, never mind that. The point is, the man lives in London, meets her in London, after working hours, and she knows him as Eric Ford."

"And you can't find an Eric Ford employed in Boxwood."

"Precisely."

"This lets out Basil Sims, doesn't it?"

"Yes, if he was ever really in the running."

"Not seriously. What about the brooch?"

"It is Mrs. Hilton's, all right. The girl was wearing it again. Says she always wears it because it is so pretty. Mrs. Lapthorn is prepared to swear to it, so is Hilton himself and Mrs. Mason. She says it is one of the pieces Mrs. Hilton took away in November."

"Ah!"

"Yes. It looks as if she thought she might want to cash in on it, but never got round to that. Unless we're wrong, and Eric Ford happened to buy it, secondhand."

"There's always an innocent explanation for every darned thing that happens in this case," said David, irritably. "Uphill, uphill, all the way."

"Yes, to the very end," said Johnson, with bitter emphasis.

"Never mind. We know the boy friend lives in London and goes to Boxwood every day. That's a gain. I can do a little piece of research on the strength of that. And Shirley, what have you done with her?"

"Daren't let her go back to the shop in case she can't keep her mouth shut. She's kicking her heels at the Willows, waiting for the 5.45 this afternoon."

"Going to use her as a decoy?"

"That's the idea. She understands the seriousness of what's happened, and she's read the papers, and Hilton has talked to her about Felicity."

"Humane treatment, for once."

"More often than you think."

"I wasn't serious. Good luck to you. If my own show goes reasonably well, you can expect to see me at Boxwood Station, also waiting for the 5.45. With Terry Byrnes, most likely. And, Johnson, when you're looking for Eric Ford, don't neglect the public services. Jill said the newsagent at the station had the right build."

"So has the postman who does Grange Road," said Johnson, and rang off.

David went back to his room at the Medical School. He had no teaching work on hand, and his ward round was over. If he was to help Johnson in the final round he must move fast.

He lit a cigarette and went over to the window. He worked on the third floor up, and from where he stood he looked across a vista of roofs, repetitive and soothing.

A time-table, he thought. Rust's, Goode's, Ford's time-table, from the date on which he took the lodging at Mrs. Hunt's house in Waterbury Street. Work it backwards. Rust came home at seven at night. He went out at seven in the morning. Now, he works in Boxwood, and goes up from there on the 5.45, which gets in to Waterloo at 6.15. He had three-quarters of an hour in which to reach Mrs. Hunt's, pushing the barrow. Except on one or two occasions a week, when he is said to have brought in big supplies of cat's meat for the refrig; this is according to Mrs. Hunt. There wouldn't be time for him to go to the house in Battersea and push the barrow back from there to Waterbury Street in three-quarters of an hour. Nor to push it to Battersea and get back from there to Waterloo in time to get down to Boxwood about eight, as he must have done. Those trains don't stop at Queen's Road, Battersea, so he couldn't work it that way.

Therefore, said David to himself, still gazing with unseeing eyes at the roofs of London, he must have pushed the barrow to the vicinity of Waterloo Station in the morning and collected it from there in the evening. But where could he leave it?

This, as David knew well, was no easy problem, for the officials of the Southern Region were jealous of their property, and not willing to allow parking by any vehicle not connected with the railway or the taxi-cab profession. He decided to go down at once and investigate.

Conditions were just as he expected. The long ramp from the Westminster Bridge end was too exposed, the dark turn-round off the Waterloo Road much too congested. Besides, it was unlikely that Rust would leave his barrow unattended where it might be stolen or, worse still, searched by the policeman on the beat. Where then could he put it?

He began to ask for the nearest car-park, and after visiting one or two where he found no answer to his question, came at last to one that commonly served the Old Vic Theatre.

And there was the answer. The car-park attendant on duty remembered quite clearly a man who asked to leave his barrow in a corner of the park while he was away on a daily job. They didn't open the park very early, the man explained, so he wasn't sure of the time the bloke left his cart, but it must have been early.

"What time of day was it when he first saw you?"

"Oh, that was one evening. To ask if 'e could leave it the next day. Two bob a week we charged 'im. Very reasonable."

And the item would not appear on the accounts of this licensed park, David felt certain. But it did not appear in the tariff, so why shouldn't the men get the benefit?

"He just left an empty handcart?" David went on. "Did you know what he used it for?"

"No. 'E never said. It 'ad a few sacks on it most days, and a little weighing machine and weights, and 'e always 'ad a bunch of fresh papers under 'is arm when 'e come for it, evenings."

"What sort of papers?"

"Newspapers."

David remembered seeing the notes of Mrs. Hunt's early statement to Inspector Cole. When he brought the handcart to Waterbury Street it had sacks on it and a supply of clean newspaper and a weighing machine. It had not occurred to Cole to wonder where the clean newsprint had come from. Nor to Johnson, apparently. Nor to himself until now, when it only confirmed what he already guessed.

"You must have wondered what his trade was?"

"Not particular. They sells most things on barrers, don't they?"

"How long did this go on for?"

"Month or six weeks. Round about."

“Have you seen him since?”

“Not a sign.” The man leered at him. “What’s ’e done? Shall I ’ave my name in the papers?”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said David, and strode away, leaving the astonished car-park attendant staring after him.

David was not very sure of the whereabouts of Waterbury Street, but he knew in which part of Lambeth it lay, so he set off in the right direction, walking at about the pace he thought he would employ if he were pushing a handcart. He took thirty minutes to find the street, making several mistakes on the way there. And then, after inquiring the shortest route to Waterloo, he walked back again, still at the same restricted pace. He took only twenty minutes this time. His theory was feasible, and backed by the evidence of the man at the car-park.

Having reached Waterloo for the second time that morning David decided to have a quick lunch there before going down to Boxwood. But first he rang up St. Edmund’s to know if he was wanted there, and afterwards he rang up Jill to tell her he did not know what time he would be home that day.

“But what about this woman?” asked Jill.

“What woman?”

“Didn’t you get my message?”

“What message?”

“Oh, darling, do stop being a parrot. The message I told them at St. Edmund’s to give you immediately.”

“I haven’t been there the last hour and a half. I’m speaking from Waterloo.”

“Oh!” There was a pause while Jill considered. “She’s in answer to your advertisement,” she said, at last.

“Oh, hell! I’ve got to go to Boxwood as soon as possible. If I come out home I may lose an hour or more.” He thought rapidly. “Never mind, I must come. Is she any good, do you think?”

“She has two suitcases, she says. Not with her, of course.”

“Hold her! I’ll be with you in twelve minutes. And Jill, listen carefully, darling. Try to get Terry Byrnes on the phone and tell him if he can possibly make it, to get leave at four this afternoon. In connection with the case. His boss knows he started the whole thing, and that we might want him at any time. Tell Terry I’ll pick him up at the front doors of his

insurance prison."

"That palatial building!" laughed Jill. "Anything less like—"

But David had rung off. So she went back to her visitor to explain that the Free Advice was even now on its way.

David drove into the city at the appointed time. In the back seat of the car were Jill and an elaborately dressed woman whose name was Mrs. Bracegirdle and whose address was in Prince of Wales Road, Battersea.

Terry was standing on the steps of his great office building when David drove up. He got in beside him and was introduced to Mrs. Bracegirdle.

"She knows all about it," David explained to him. "She is coming with us to see if she can recognize the man we suspect."

"Do you really suspect anyone, sir?" said Terry.

"I do. But Inspector Johnson may by now have found someone quite different."

"I back you, sir," said Terry. "Every time."

"That's very flattering," said David, with a laugh. "But it may be rash. The reason I asked you to come, Terry, is in case you might possibly recognize the man yourself."

"I didn't see his face."

"I know. You only saw a hand and arm. But you saw the gesture, and you might feel it was familiar if you saw a similar movement."

"I hope not," muttered Terry.

"Oh, nobody is going to be laid out. I just wanted to try everything I could think of."

David drove first to the Willows and was thankful to find Chief-Inspector Johnson there, with Hilton, Mrs. Lapthorn, and a very nervous, pale-faced Miss Gardiner. All three were trying to read papers or periodicals in the pleasant sitting-room with the big windows; they were not having much success. Mrs. Mason, very much in her element, let the newcomers in, looking with approval at David's additions to the growing list of witnesses.

Johnson took Mrs. Bracegirdle away with him into another room, and presently was in conversation with Scotland Yard. The photograph of Felicity Hilton was brought from the sitting-room and Mrs. Bracegirdle identified it. But the name the

landlady had known was Norris. Felicity Norris and Peter Norris. Oh, yes, she had called her husband Peter.

"At last," said David, when Mrs. Bracegirdle, in possession of the salient facts, had joined the waiting party, and he was alone with the chief-inspector.

"At last," said Johnson. He had listened to David's tale of his researches near Waterloo, and he felt quite pleased with the sum of the day's activities.

"We go into action at five-thirty," he said. "Mrs. Mason had better give us a cuppa in preparation."

"What action?" asked David, as the inspector came back into the room, after issuing his order.

"The capture, we hope, and identification of Eric Ford, alias Philip Goode, alias Harold Rust, alias Peter Norris."

"Which might, perhaps, be his real name?" suggested David.

"No. I told you we have not traced anyone answering to the description, working in Boxwood, called Peter, who also knows Shirley Gardiner."

"You haven't surely had time to cover the whole of Boxwood."

"Perhaps not."

"How will you work this showdown?"

"Take Shirley to the main entrance at the station and let her go to the up-platform in the way she always does. She says Eric Ford crosses the bridge, to it. So would anyone coming into the station from the direction of the shopping centre. I shall have men posted at this entrance and also at the one to the up-platform. They will note anyone likely, and pass it on to men on the platform itself."

"I think I will go on to the up-platform from the other side, a minute or two before the train is due," said David. "Eric Ford should then have arrived, or be just arriving, to join Shirley. I shall have Terry with me."

"Keep out of it," said Johnson. "You can watch if you like; you deserve that, certainly. But don't throw a spanner in the works."

"I promise," said David, and meant what he said.

At five forty-two Shirley Gardiner, waiting terrified on the up-platform at Boxwood Station, looked anxiously, but in vain, for her doubtful friend. On the other side, but standing back in the

shadow of the station roof, were David and Terry. The former of these two was watching the opposite platform. He saw that the station bookstall was closed, with its shutter drawn. He had never looked at it from this position before, at a distance, across the line.

Shirley was looking at the bridge. A familiar figure had just climbed the stairs and was proceeding across the flat part over the line. Steeling her heart, she waved. This was Johnson's agreed signal. He and two men with him moved out of the platform waiting room.

The signal bell for the train rang twice, and the signal fell with its usual deliberate clonk.

At this moment David sprang forward to the edge of the platform. Opposite him he was seeing the bookstall in a fresh light. The boards below the green shutter yelled at him; those advertised names, which no one ever bothered to look at. *Picture Post. Evening Standard. Times. Economist. Reynolds's News*.

"Peter!" shouted David, and again, "Look at the bookstall! Peter!"

With Terry at his heels he ran rapidly across the bridge.

As they rushed past him, a hoarse cry came from the man moving down from the bridge. He jumped the last six stairs in one bound, nearly fell, recovered himself, and leaped at David. The train appeared on the bend, moving rapidly into the station.

Terry Byrnes wasted no time on warning cries. He had kept his eyes on Shirley, as much because hers was the only face worth looking at on the platform, as because she was the key to the solution of his drama. He had seen her signal, and had then stared hard at the man crossing the bridge, but had seen nothing he recognized. He knew David's voice, however, and the man's reaction to it was unmistakable. When he leaped at David, Terry launched himself at once across the murderer's path.

They came down together, rolling nearly to the edge of the platform. David, who had sprung round at once when he heard the man call out, had time to fling himself against Terry as the train came in. The three of them were at the extreme edge of the platform as it passed them. But Johnson and his men were also on the spot, and the quarry was secured before he could recover his feet. David and Terry slowly extricated themselves from the melee.

“Thank you,” said David. “He would have put me under the train, if you had not jumped in as you did.”

“I’d have been under if you hadn’t stopped me,” said Terry breathlessly.

“Oh, David,” said Jill, running up, “are you all right?”

At the back of the platform, where Jill had left her, Mrs. Bracegirdle said, “There now! If it isn’t Mr. Norris himself!” But one of the policemen hurried her away, before she could speak to him.

“I thought I told you not to throw a spanner in the works,” Johnson said to David, as the latter turned, an arm round Jill.

“It’s been there for us to see all the time,” said David, hazily. “Peter. Just as Mrs. Hilton must have looked at it every time she went to London. She called him Peter because the advertisement boards on his bookstall had capital letters that made up ‘Peter.’ A silly whimsy, but she was like that, poor woman.”

8 Landladies' Chorus

I

As Chief-Inspector Johnson said afterwards, the end of it was really too easy. By attacking David on the platform at Boxwood the murderer laid himself open to a perfectly straightforward charge of assault. And he played still further into the hands of the police by saying he lost his head when David pushed past him and seemed to be making for his girl friend.

Johnson took him to the Boxwood Police Station, seeming to accept this explanation. The charge was made and the man, who now gave his name as Arthur Young, was taken into custody for the night.

"There seems to be a bit of a mix-up," said Johnson. "Your young lady doesn't know you by that name. She knows you as Eric Ford."

The prisoner had no answer to this, but repeated that his name was Arthur Young, and that he was employed by the big firm of stationers that ran the bookstall on Boxwood Station. He did not seem to be unduly concerned at the way things had gone. Nor surprised to find himself arrested by three plain-clothes detectives.

But the next morning brought him a painful and secretly dreaded surprise. He found himself in the yard behind the Police Station being lined up with various other men of his height and general appearance; one of them was Alastair Hilton.

"What's this in aid of?" he asked the constable who led him out. He had not slept very well, and his breakfast had not been what he considered adequate. He felt irritable. He wanted to appear before the magistrates, pay his fine, make his apology, and be dismissed.

"What's the idea?" he said again, more angrily.

"You wait and see," replied his escort. "Get over there in line and shut your trap."

The row of waiting men opened their ranks unwillingly to admit Arthur Young, and two constables took up positions

behind the row of backs.

The next move found Young steeled to show indifference, but as figure after figure emerged into the yard, led by Chief-Inspector Johnson, and as each in turn singled him out with no hesitation whatever, and as he heard the string of names which he had thought were buried with each incident in the concealment of his crime, he realized the extent of discovery, and knew that he was lost.

To the other men, standing there, the occasion became a little ludicrous. For the identifiers were nearly all women, and of a type made absurd by the music halls. One after another the landladies came out to recognize the man who had deceived them. Mrs. Bracegirdle came first. She recognized Peter Norris without any trouble at all. Had already recognized him at the railway station. She'd always had her doubts that the poor woman was not his wife. When he didn't pay the rent Mrs. Norris sometimes gave her an article of clothing or a piece of jewellery to cover it. But in the end she had to get rid of the pair, keeping their suitcases, of course, as a deposit.

It was impossible to stop this flow of revelation, so Mrs. Bracegirdle was hurried away, still talking, to make her deposition elsewhere. Mrs. Hunt of Waterbury Street took her place, and after her Mrs. Field, for good measure, and so Harold Rust was secured. And then yet another landlady came, owner of lodgings where Arthur Young, under his real name, was now living. Her appearance seemed to give him a more substantial existence than the others.

After that, Joe, from the Royal Arms, pointed out Young as the man on the motor-bike, and old Harding recognized him as the man to whom he had lent his barrow. Two waitresses from Bloomsbury knew him as the husband of a Mrs. Hilton they used to serve. And a neat, polite person, representing a firm that dealt in refrigerators, picked out a former client, Philip Goode.

Finally Shirley Gardiner, protesting that she had already told them who he was, pointed to him as Eric Ford, and went away to sign her statement that he had made her a present of a brooch some eight weeks before.

For an identification parade, it was startlingly successful. The links had been widely separated, but this morning's work brought them together at last, and welded them into a chain

that was to bind Young's guilt upon him in a way that gave him no slightest hope of escape.

Towards the end of September of that year, David and Jill went down to Duckington to spend a quiet week end at the White Hart. The holidays were over, and their family back at their respective schools. After the sorting and packing, and sewing on the name tapes, Jill felt she deserved a rest.

In the residents' lounge they were surprised to find Alastair Hilton, sitting near a cheerful wood fire. They had not seen him since Young's trial: he looked remarkably improved in health.

"Down for the week end, too?" asked David.

"Down for good," said Hilton. He told them he had felt he could not go on living at Boxwood with its bitter memories, and that he had realized he was hardly capable of continuing to work at his business.

"I've sold out," he said. "And I wonder I didn't think of it before. Mrs. Norbury has taken me on as a permanent guest. She has given me one of the best rooms in the house. It looks out on the downs—magnificent view. I feel I shall live to a hundred."

They chatted for a time, and then Jill and David went to their room.

"The White Hart and Mrs. Norbury seem to have worked a miracle," said Jill. "I didn't think we were ever likely to see him again. The day Young was sentenced, I thought he would collapse any minute. He really does look as if he'd live to a hundred, as he said."

"He won't do that," said David. "But he may be good for another ten years, with luck. Mrs. Norbury has it in hand, I think."

"Good luck to them," said Jill. "He deserves a break, if anyone does."

"I think he's getting over it," said David. "He is not a vindictive man, but it's a savage world, and it must have been heartening for him the day Young was hanged."

Hilton had indeed recovered, as far as he was able to do so. Much as he had loved Felicity, he had always been made to feel, during their marriage, that its failure was his fault, and his

alone. Relief from his derogation was sweet, and Mrs. Norbury's gentle regard even sweeter. His self-respect had returned to him.

That evening he invited David and Jill to coffee in his room after dinner. And when they were comfortably disposed round his fire, he began, without hesitation or apparent pain, to talk about the case.

"They tell me Terry Byrnes has gone into the Police Force," he said. "Or intends to do so, after his military service. He'll be a very useful member, I should think."

"It was the nice things the judge said to him that made up his mind," said Jill. "About having shown himself a good citizen, and on the side of the law. And that if it hadn't been for him the crime might never have been disclosed."

"I don't think that was strictly true," said David. "Terry quite accidentally saw the crime committed, but the finding of the bones on the roof was bound to happen sooner or later, because all roofs are visited for repairs sooner or later. They would have lasted, even in their exposed position, for a very long time, and they were unusual enough to rouse curiosity about their origin in almost anyone."

"Janet Lapthorn, too," said Hilton, "being Janet, was bound to act as she did. And after a time, even without the other information, I should have acted myself, and probably been convicted."

"No," said David. "You could not have been confused with Rust. And I think that, even without Terry, the case would have developed exactly as it did. Because the murderer arranged his own destruction."

There was a silence, while Hilton thought this over.

"Yes. I suppose you are right," he said at last. "He shouldn't have tried to mix me up in it."

"Exactly. If he had done nothing, we should never have got him. He was clever enough to leave no links between Norris, Goode, Rust, and Young. But he overdid his cleverness. He wanted more. He wanted revenge."

"Revenge?" said Hilton and Jill together.

"Revenge for the dreadful position he felt you had put him in. As you know from the trial, he was a gambler and always out of funds. Also, he was full of envy of the prosperous people, like Basil Sims, whom he saw every day waiting for the business

train, while he could do nothing better than stand, selling them newspapers. He was certainly attracted by your wife, but he was attracted more by her position, as he thought of it, and by her supposed wealth. After she went to live with him I think he expected an easy divorce, and alimony that would give him all the extra money he needed. He must have been bitterly disappointed by your stand. How much worse would he feel when he realized, as he must have done, that Mrs. Hilton was getting upset and frightened by their position and their increasing poverty! That motor-bike, secondhand though it was, must have made quite a hole in their income."

"So you think he planned to kill her and put the blame on me?"

"No. It is possible, but he was not cool or calculating. He was a person who lost his head and his temper very easily. He proved that on several occasions. No. We can't be sure what happened that foggy night in November, but we do know that Mrs. Bracegirdle refused to have them in her house any longer, and threatened to call the police. That would have meant ruin for him: publicity would have lost him his job, as well as Felicity. I think they went off together, and in desperation, trying to keep her with him, he broke into that ruined house, and they spent the night there. Miserably enough, in the dark, with only a few old dirty decayed blankets to lie on. I think that by the morning your wife had made up her mind to return to you. She must have told him so, and in his irritation, from the discomfort and the continuing fog, and his realization of his failure, his many failures, I think he worked himself into a violent rage, which so frightened her that she rushed away from him into that room overlooking the railway, trying to escape, trying to call for help. Immediately afterwards he had enough to do concealing the crime; but after that he had to try to move his load of guilt: he tried to put it upon you, because your understanding and forgiving attitude to your wife had taken her from him even before he took her life."

Hilton shielded his face with his hand, looking sadly into the fire.

"Of course, we can't be sure," David went on. "There may have been some other reason for the mad course he embarked on. Before that first week-end visit of his to Duckington there

was nothing whatever to connect him with you. You would never have thought of him. You never did think of him, did you?"

"No. Never once. Though I saw him every day."

"Perhaps his lesser mistakes would have betrayed him in the end. He had ideas, but he was careless. It was highly dangerous to leave the suitcases with Mrs. Bracegirdle, because it became too dangerous later, after the hunt started, to attempt to get them back. It was silly and mean, or very careless, not to pay Mrs. Hunt what he owed her for electricity. And the same with old Harding. He left grievances wherever he went, and unsatisfied people always complain. Harding, who suspected him of dirty work, would not have accosted me, thinking I was Young, if he had not also wanted the money Young owed him. It was foolhardy in the extreme of Young to give Shirley that brooch, but he was probably afraid to take it to a jeweller, and I think we had rather given him to understand, by then, that you were the chief suspect. No, on the whole," David finished, "he cooked his own goose, as most of them do. They have this uncontrollable itch to display their guilt, explain it, justify it, or transfer it. He ran true to form."

"When did you first spot him?" asked Hilton.

"I had a faint suspicion the first time I went to Boxwood by train. There was a boy in charge at the bookstall. He said for one thing that Young had been away from work, sick, in November. And he also said, which surprised me, something about Mrs. Sims being a smasher, as he put it, but not such a smasher as Mrs. Hilton. When I showed surprise he mumbled that that was what the boss had said. I just wondered."

"And kept on wondering," said Jill. "I know you."

"Of course, I ought to have spotted the advertisement boards. But I didn't. One is so unobservant."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Alastair Hilton.

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